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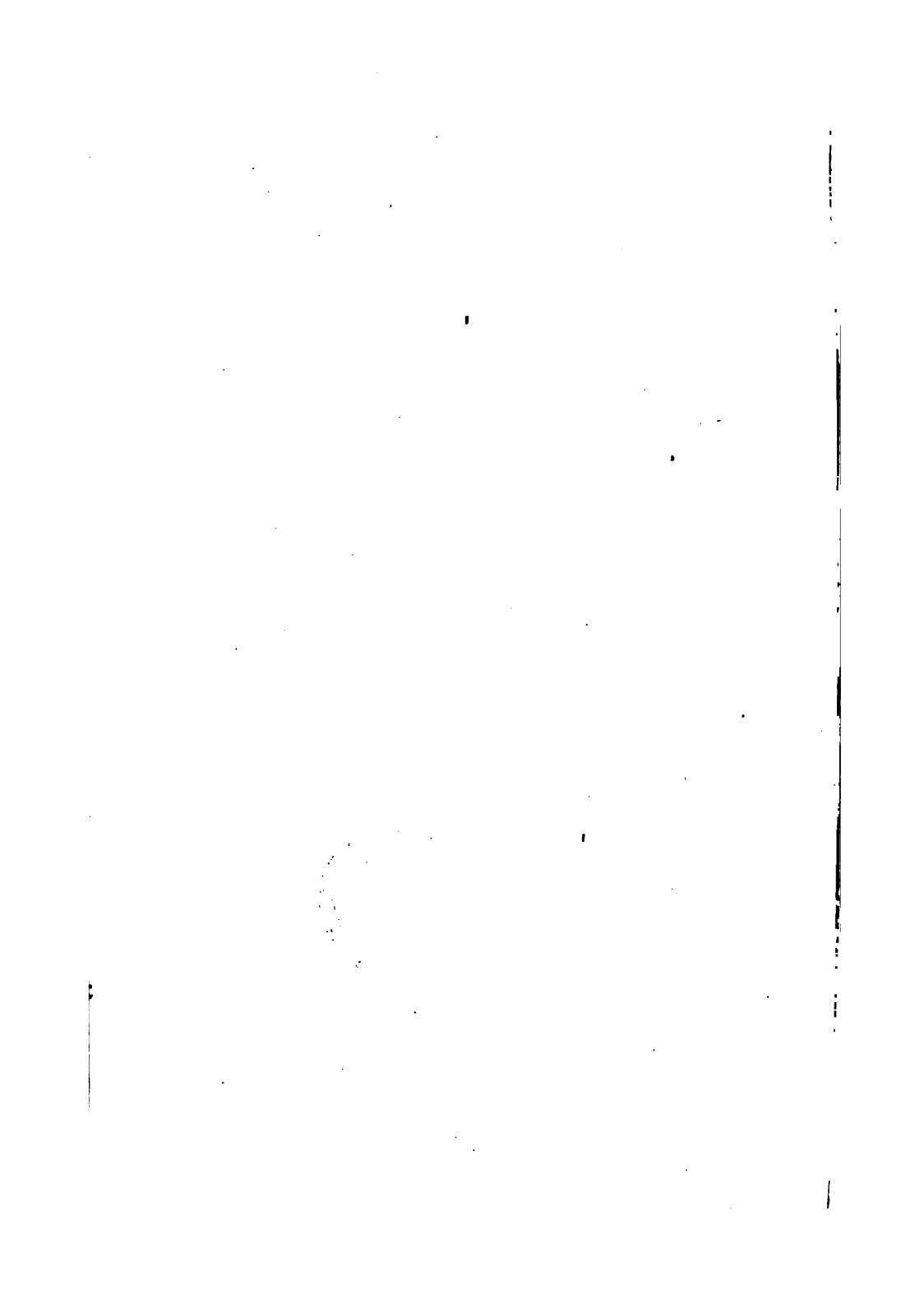
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# A LITTLE WORLD.

BY

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"*BY BIRTH A LADY*," "*THE SAPPHIRE CROSS*," "*MIDNIGHT WEBS*,"

ETC. ETC.

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# A LITTLE WORLD.



## CHAPTER I.

### THE POOR-BOXES.

MRS RUGGLES thought that it was her place, and said so; but Mr Purkis was of opinion that it was his place, and he said so—bringing forward, too, the fact that he had looked after them ever since the new ones had been placed inside the north and south doors. And, in spite of Mrs Ruggles' opposition, the beadle still continued to polish the quaint imitation antique steel hinges and clasps of the two little oak poor-boxes, while, to his great annoyance, Mrs Ruggles used to go and rub them over again.

Very proud was Mr Purkis of those boxes and their meandering steel-work and corners, of which there was so much that

but little of the wood was left visible; and nearly all that was covered by the guards round the keyhole and slit through which the charitably-disposed of the congregation were in the habit of dropping their contributions.

"You see the place is so damp, sir," Mr Purkis said to Jared; "and it's not in my constitooshun to let a woman like that Mrs Ruggles go about and grin like a dog in the city, and sneer because there's a speck on the ornyments, and then pretend that she's so ashamed of their state that she's obliged to polish them up herself. But they're a mortal trouble to keep bright—they're as hard to keep bright as a man's conscience, sir; they tarnish like gold lace, although I've tried everything I know of, beginning with sand-paper, sir, and going down to Bath bricks and emery powder. Do you know, sir," he said, mysteriously, "it goes agen me to speak of her, she being, as it were, one of us; but, sir, it's my belief as she damps and moistens the steel on the sly, or spits upon them, o' purpose to aggravate my spirit and make the things rust. In fack,

I caught her agen one, about a week ago. Every respect to you, sir, but I wish now as Mrs Purkis had took the post, sir; for Mrs Ruggles makes herself very okkard, and altogether she's a woman as Mrs Purkis don't like, and I can assure you as a fack that when my missus takes a dislike to any one, that person ain't worth much.

" You see, sir, she's a dry sort of a woman, and very hard; and if she was my wife, I should never expect as there'd be any gravy with the meat for dinner. That's one of the great differences in wives, sir. Ruggles wouldn't never have been so full of wrinkles and furrers in his face if he'd had plenty of gravy. Look at me, sir; I'm a hearty man, work hard, and do a rattling good business in boots and shoes, princip'lly ready-mades. I weigh seventeen stone, and I'm pretty happy, sir; and what's the reason? Gravy, sir, gravy! You never sit down to our table without seeing plenty of gravy on it. Even when it's cold-meat day, sir, there's always a little saved in a tea-cup to eat with your potatoes. My wife was a cook, you know, sir, when I married her, and she well knows

the vally of gravy. She won my heart with it, sir, and keeps it too. It's the real milk of human kindness. You never knew a woman who loved gravy, and liked to see others enjoy it, leather a child as that woman leathers that child of their 'n. Ruggles thinks she's a wonder, and of course it would be a sin to undeceive him; but I'm pretty sure of one thing, and that is, that there's never any gravy to speak of on Ruggles' table."

And after his long speech, Mr Purkis, who had just come home very moist and oozy from the church, after having a good polish at the poor-boxes, handed Jared the church keys for him to go and practise.

It was not very far from Purkis's boot and shoe emporium to St Runwald's, and when Jared reached the gates, he stood looking round for his boy—the invisible Ichabod—who was of a very mercurial temperament, and, if first upon the spot, given to indulgence in overing tombstones or standing upon one leg on the top; walking, at the risk of being impaled, round the iron railings of the family vaults; swarming up the rain

water-pipes, and turning himself into a living gargoyle ; throwing stones into the mouths of the corbels and breaking the windows ; carving his initials in the mouldering stone, where " I. G." could often be distinguished, more often, however, with another letter added, greatly to Ichabod's disgust, by evil-disposed street boys, who mocked at his costume generally, and pulled his " tawsel " cap. The consequence of this was that the word, " P. I. G." graced the walls of the church in several places. Before now Ichabod had been upon the roof, and marked out the size of his shoe with a knife-point in the soft lead, and had been upon the top of the tower and amongst the bells, and down in the vaults, where he told his schoolfellows he had seen a live ghost ; and the only wonder was, that in all Ichabod's travels he had never been mutilated or killed.

Jared Pellett looked for him east and west, north into the porch, and south towards the street ; but there was no Ichabod in sight, so he shook his head, and said to himself that Ichabod was a bad boy—a fact that he had taken into consideration scores of times be-

fore—and then applying the large key, he entered the church and swung to the door.

The moment after entering, Jared started as if alarmed, for there, close beside him, stood a figure in the dim aisle, but he recovered himself instantly upon seeing that it was only the old vicar, whilst behind him stood churchwarden Timson; and then it was that Jared saw that they had been emptying the poor-box.

“How do Mr Pellett? Nice day,” said the vicar, cordially. Then turning to the churchwarden—

“Must be something more, Mr Timson; feel again.”

Mr Timson lifted the lid of the little steel-bound chest and thrust in a fat hand, feeling about in all directions, as if chasing active coins into dark corners, for them to dodge through his fingers and escape again. His face was quite a study as he poked about, and at length he drew forth his hand, looked at it on both sides, and declared that there was nothing more.

“Tut, tut, tut!—how strange! Why I felt sure that I put in a sovereign myself. It

must have been last time ; and yet I felt so sure, and—and—yes—to be sure ! here it is, 'Sunday, 24th day, one pound !' There !" he continued, triumphantly holding the pocket-book out to the churchwarden, "I knew I did ; and yet there's nothing here but silver and copper. Are you sure that you felt well, Mr Timson ?"

"Feel again," said the latter, good-temperedly ; and again the fat hand went to work, and the face looked more solid, but without success.

"Must have been in the other box," he said at last. The vicar brightened up at this, and they crossed the church to the north door, but from the scraps of conversation Jared Pellett could hear from the organ-loft, it was evident that the quest was without result. Through waiting for the boy, Jared soon dropped into one of his dreamy moods, and became forgetful of things external, until the tardy Ichabod arrived, out of breath, as if he had been exerting himself strenuously to get to the church in time, when the edifice was soon resounding with strains which drowned the rattling of keys and snapping



of locks, as well as the conversation of vicar and churchwarden upon the subject of the missing money ; but for all that the conversation went on.

“ There might have been a great deal taken,” said the vicar.

“ Heaps,” acquiesced Mr Timson.

“ For, of course,” said Mr Gray, “ this is an exceptional time ; and in other instances I doubt whether I should be able to miss anything.”

“ Very true ; quite agree with you,” said Mr Timson. “ Just as you say.”

“ Pounds might have been abstracted,” said the vicar.

“ Abstract, an epitome, a taking from,” muttered Mr Timson ; “ yes, just so, pounds, very true, sir.”

“ Hang it all, Timson, don’t be so aggravating,” said the vicar, pettishly. “ What is the good of agreeing with one in everything, it can’t do any good ?”

“ Just so, sir,” said Mr Timson ; and then, turning very red and hot, “ No, sir, of course not ; but can’t do any harm.”

“ Then for goodness’ sake come into the

vestry ;” and the vicar led the way towards the little robing room to count the offerings of the charitable.

“ Now, are you sure about that sovereign ? ” said Mr Timson to the vicar, as they passed down the nave.

“ Sure ! ” exclaimed the vicar, “ have I not shown you the entry ? But there ! I must have made a mistake.”

“ Of course you have,” said Timson, triumphantly.

“ For it is impossible,” continued the vicar, “ for any one to have obtained access to the money ; and surely no one would be so cruel as rob the poor, eh ? What do you think ? Calmly and considerately now ? ”

“ Just ——,” Mr Timson cut off the “ so,” and rubbed the side of his nose, and looked mysterious. Then, resting one finger upon the vicar’s black silk vest, he said, “ Once upon a time my desk was robbed—over and over again—without being broken open, and I put in marked money, and still it went ; but I found the party out by that plan. And how do you think they got at the money, sir ? ”

"Crooked wire through the crack," said the vicar.

"No, no—false keys!" said Mr Timson, wagging his head. "False keys, and it was some one that had constant access to my office that did it."

The vicar mused, and fidgeted his neck in his stiff cravat, as involuntarily he turned over in his own mind the list of persons who had private access to the church—clerk, pew-opener, beadle, curate, organist, organ-blower, churchwardens, himself; and then he shook his head again, and the pair proceeded to count the money over once more upon the vestry table, calculated the total amount of silver and copper, made entries, and then tied the money carefully up in a little bag, and all to the accompaniment of Jared's music, which ever and again made the windows of the little vestry to rattle loudly.

"Fine organist, Mr Pellet!" said the vicar, after listening in silence for a few minutes. "We were lucky in getting him, Timson."

"Very fine; quite agree with you," said Mr Timson. "Capital congregations we get,

too, now—almost double what they were in old Harvey's time."

"Um!" ejaculated the vicar, with a curious dry look upon his features.

"Just so, sir," said Mr Timson. "You see, people like music, and will come miles to hear it."

"Well, yes, I suppose so," said the vicar, half sadly; "and ours certainly is a very fine instrument."

"And beautifully played," said Mr Timson; "not but what I think we have too much of it; but people say it is well played."

"Yes," said the vicar, absently, for his thoughts were upon the poor-box; "beautifully played, certainly. By the way, how startled Mr Pellet seemed when he came in!"

"Poor man! yes: he's nervous," said Timson; "those musical chaps generally are. Didn't expect us, you know. Might ask his opinion about the box."

"Yes, we might, certainly," said the vicar; and then, uneasily, "No, I don't think it would be of any use. Let it rest for the present, Mr Timson; perhaps, after all, we may be mistaken."

"Very true, sir," said Timson. "Not often that there is gold in the box. People are not very fond of giving to the poor and lending to the Lord, though that's all of a piece with their behaviour. They're not fond of lending to anybody. Seems to go against a man's nature."

"Not in all cases, Mr Timson," said the vicar, stiffly; "there are many exceptions,—yourself, for instance."

"Present company—present company, sir," said Mr Timson, "always left out of the question;" and Mr Timson looked very fidgety and uncomfortable.

"Not in a case of this description," said the vicar. "A shining light should never be placed beneath a bushel."

Mr Timson looked very unlike a shining light at this time, as he stared at the vicar, and then round the church, and then fidgeted from foot to foot, and held his hat first in one hand, and then in the other, as if in a great hurry to go. But Mr Gray would not come out of the vestry, and Mr Timson had to go in again, for he could not be spared yet. In fact, asking him for the bag once more, the

vicar again carefully went through the amount of small change—copper, threepenny and fourpenny pieces, sixpences, shillings, and half-crowns—to see whether, after all, his sovereign might not be there, explaining the while to Mr Timson that some gold was very pale, and in dim lights, like that where they were, sovereigns looked almost like shillings.

But though he carefully examined every shilling, and turned it over, there was not one that could for an instant be taken for a sovereign ; so, with a sigh, the vicar slowly told up the total, replaced the money in the bag, and tied it exceedingly tight, before once more handing it to the churchwarden, when together they passed down the nave, listening to Jared's harmonies.

But the vicar seemed uneasy : the music had lost its charm ; and instead of following his usual custom of sitting down in some comfortable pew to listen for half-an-hour, he softly followed the churchwarden into the street, and went homewards shaking his head,—that head being, the while, sorely troubled with thoughts of sacrilege and the missing sovereign.

## CHAPTER II.

### GRIT IN THE WHEEL.

"You are precious quiet, Harry," said Lionel, as they strolled on till they reached Trafalgar Square, almost without a word having been spoken.

"I was only thinking," was the reply, and then they walked on again in silence; for Harry Clayton was indeed thinking, deeply too, of his position. There was a vague sense of danger, of disappointment, troubling him. One moment he felt ready to hurry back to the wretched street, and beg Patty to grant him an interview; the next he shrank from it, and asked himself how he could expect her, if she had any proper sense of pride, to listen to him again. Now, too, came a growing feeling of dislike to Lionel. He told himself that life with him would now be insupportable, and he fell to wondering again what the young man had seen. Would he jeer and banter him, and torture him by

endeavouring to excite jealousy? However, he felt that he must let matters take their course.

How his thoughts ran riot, though! From time to time the busy traffic of the London streets faded from before his eyes, for a bright little vision to occupy the place—always a fair young face bent towards a dove, the startled look of confusion, and then the subsequent scene.

It was nothing new that it would come—that face; try as he would to drive it from him, there it was again and again, soft, gentle, and pleasing. He told himself that it was absurd; that he had seen in different society hundreds of sweeter faces, but no one had ever so impressed him before.

“Could she have been acting?” he muttered; “but what a place, and what associations!”

He could not have analysed his thoughts had he tried, for they were strangely mingled, and involuntarily he gazed uneasily from time to time at the careless frank-looking young fellow at his side, apparently now too



much occupied with his dog to heed aught beside.

Harry roused himself at last, though, from his reverie as Lionel spoke.

"See you at dinner, I suppose, old fellow?"

"Are you going away? Anywhere in particular?"

"No—no—no!" was the reply. "May perhaps take the dog in the Park for a swim. Change for him, poor fellow!"

Harry hesitated, as if about to speak, and then they parted, taking different directions, but with thoughts centring at the same spot.

Involuntarily Harry glanced over his shoulder, when he had gone about fifty yards, and then he bit his lip with annoyance, for he had turned to encounter the sharp glance of Lionel, who was also looking back.

The young men then walked hastily on, each moody and frowning, and thinking that the possibility of their continuing to be dwellers beneath the same roof was hourly diminishing; for though Harry would gladly have stayed, there seemed to be a rock springing up between them, momentarily dividing more and more their course; and Harry began now to re-

capitulate the past, and to recollect that Lionel had during the last fortnight been growing more impatient of the slight control placed upon him.

"I shall be answerable to the father for the escapades of the son," muttered Harry. "He trusts me, and I cannot shut my eyes to all the follies I shall be called upon to witness."

He bit his lip again here, and asked himself if he were not becoming a hypocrite, and drawing too largely upon the future?

"We shall have to part," he said, half aloud. "I can't help it—we shall never get on together now. What a fool! what a weak idiot I am growing!" he exclaimed. "It will take very little to bring about a rupture now. Well, the sooner perhaps the better!" he added, moodily; and then he walked on and on, with the threatening rupture nearer at hand than he thought for, as, in spite of himself, he made his way back to Brownjohn Street, eliciting from D. Wragg the words uttered at the end of a previous chapter—

"It's one of them swells as come about the dorg!"

D. Wragg accompanied his words with a great deal of pantomimic gesture, as he stood smiling at the two girls, heedless of the fact that Patty was shrinking from the encounter.

"It is not to see me—I cannot see anybody!" she stammered, crimsoning the while. And then a few hurried questions were put by Janet, and replied to by D. Wragg, the result being that hand-in-hand the young girls entered the little back-room,—Patty's face flushing a still deeper crimson upon finding that Harry Clayton was already there, and standing with his back to the window.

"I was so completely taken by surprise," exclaimed Harry, eagerly advancing with outstretched hand, "that I hardly knew"——

He stopped short, for he saw in the manner in which Patty drew back how thoroughly she read his heart. He was ashamed of his past weakness, that would not own her before his friend; and with burning face and beating heart, Patty, ready to burst into tears though she was, held herself aloof. "He would not know her then," she said to herself; "he should not know her now." It was all at an

end, and the old childish dream must be forgotten altogether.

What Patty would have said, what more Harry Clayton would have whispered in excuse, it is impossible to say ; for while Janet scanned first one face and then the other, D. Wragg whispered, from just inside the shop, where he had gone to respond to a summons, "Here's your friend come back. I ain't told him as you're here. Don't you make no mistake ; but shall I ask him in, too?"

For a moment Harry Clayton's face was troubled, but the next instant he had recovered himself.

"Yes, Mr Wragg," he said, quietly, "ask him to come in," and the rough head of the dealer was drawn back into the shop.

If possible Patty's flush grew deeper, and lines began to make their appearance in the forehead of Harry Clayton, as he scrutinised the young girl attentively, while a few words were heard in the shop.

Directly after, in a cool, insolent fashion, and with a smile upon his face, Lionel Redgrave sauntered in ; but the smile faded on the instant as he saw who stood beside the

door. The blood mounted to his boyish temples, and for a while youthful ingenuousness had the full sway.

He soon laughed it off, assuming the cool easy way of the man-about-town, and speaking lightly, he exclaimed—

“Quite a *contretemps*! I am rather late in the field, it seems. I was not aware that Mr Harry Clayton was turning gay. Not the first saint who has carried the world beneath his sackcloth. Good morning all!”

“Stop,” cried Harry, hastily, and he struggled to speak all he knew, and tell of the previous meeting at Norwood, but his courage failed. “Stop a moment! My visit here was for the purpose of giving advice.”

“Cheap, and always plenty on supply,” sneered Lionel.

——“Of uttering a few words of warning.”

“Exactly; to practise the part of mentor to the young. Rather selfish, though, Harry—rather selfish. Shouldn’t have thought it of you!”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh! nothing—nothing at all,” said Lionel,

lightly—"nothing surprising in *my* coming ; but for you to be here ! Ah ! Harry, I'm afraid the study of the classics is making you light and wild."

It was now Harry's turn to look conscious, for his heart seemed to whisper to him that the shafts let fly by his companion were not so badly aimed ; and for a few moments he strove vainly for the composure he needed to carry on the wordy warfare with effect.

"Perhaps we had better bring this interview to a close," he said at last ; for, in spite of Lionel's talk of withdrawing, he still stayed.

Clayton looked round as he spoke, to find Janet's fierce dark eyes fixed upon him as if they would read his every thought. Then bowing to Patty, he turned as if to leave, hesitating though as he reached the door.

"Oh ! I'm ready," said Lionel, superciliously, as he rightly interpreted the other's uneasiness. "Good morning, ladies."

Then closely following Clayton, he once more passed through the shop, followed by the head-shakings of D. Wragg, and encountering the offensive stare of the heavy young man outside, who now followed the

friends until they reached the streets traversed by a more respectable class than those who favoured the Decadian.

No words were spoken—the young men walking side by side—the one careless and indifferent, the other anxious and troubled in mind—more so even than he cared to own to himself.

## CHAPTER III.

### SEPARATION.

ON reaching Lionel's chambers, a show of cordiality was kept up ; but during the walk back, Harry, filled with bitterness, had decided upon his future course—rashly enough, he knew—but he was determined to put an end to what he told himself had been but a mad dream after one who was not worthy of his regard.

The young men lunched, walked out, and dined together, after which, with their coffee and cigars, they sat by the open window, where Lionel, who had evidently been turning something over in his mind—suddenly exclaimed—

“ I don't want to quarrel, Harry ; but I have been thinking over that meeting this morning.”

“ Hear me first,” exclaimed Harry, almost fiercely. “ You spoke in a strangely supercilious way, Lionel—a way that cut severely ;



and I feel it due to myself and to my position to declare solemnly that my visit to that place this morning was prompted by the purest motives." He hesitated for a moment, but the feeling of weak pride even now restrained him from telling Lionel who the object of this conversation was. "By a desire for the well-being of one who struck me as"—

"Oh, yes!" burst in Lionel, "of course. I know what you would say. So was I moved by the purest motives."

"Listen to me, Lionel," said Harry, rising. "I am not blind. I am, for all my quiet life, perhaps as worldly wise as yourself. Do not think me so simple as not to see that you have a *penchant* for that young girl. And now, Lionel Redgrave, I ask you, as a gentleman and a man of honour, to give me your word that you will go there no more."

"Pooh! rubbish!" exclaimed Lionel, angrily. "Do you think that *I* am blind—or a child—a little boy with his tutor, to be taken to task for every word and look. Perhaps we are both worldly wise—perhaps not.

At any rate, I am going to bind myself by no absurd promises. Perhaps you had better yourself go there no more."

"I do not intend!" said Harry, quietly.

"Frankly, then," said Lionel, hotly, "I do. I told you that I should before, and——by Jove, where's Luff? Why, I've not seen him since we came back. He was with me when I entered that shop the second time, I'll swear, and then all this confounded humbug put him out of my mind. There! you see," he continued, with a laugh, "I must go there again to enlist the services of Mr D. Wragg. Don't you make no mistake, Mr Harry Clayton; I'm not going to lose my 'dorg,' if I can help it. But there, Harry, old fellow, as I said before, I don't want to quarrel, and I'm quite out of breath now with this long-winded speechifying; only don't be such a confounded nuisance."

Harry Clayton, who was greatly moved, took a turn up and down the room.

"Here, shake hands," cried Lionel, "and let's have no more of it. Let's be off out and see something. Why, stop! here!—where are you going?"

"To my room," said Harry, speaking very slowly and seriously, as he took the hand held out to him.

"What for?" said Lionel.

"To write to your father!"

"Ha—ha—ha! Ha—ha—ha!" laughed Lionel, half angrily dashing away his companion's hand, half with contempt. "Are you going to tell him that I have been a naughty boy, and to ask him to come up with a stick?"

"No!" said Harry, quietly, almost sadly, "but to ask him to relieve me of my responsibility;" and then he left the room.

"A confounded prig!" cried Lionel; "he grows insufferable." Then throwing his half-smoked cigar from the window in his impatience, the lighted fragment struck a heavy-faced man who was leaning against a lamp-post, and staring up at the window of the well-lighted room.

The man dashed his hand to his face, growled, muttered, shook his fist at the window, and then stooped, picked up the piece of cigar, knocked away the few remaining sparks, and deposited it in his pocket, when

he gave another glance upwards as he said, audibly—

“Look out, my fine fellow!—look out!”

Lionel lit a fresh cigar and strolled up and down the room for a few moments. “Coming to a nice pass,” he muttered. “Just as if one couldn’t indulge in a little piece of innocent flirtation without being taken to task like that!”

“No, Master Harry!” he said, after another turn or two. “I’m not blind either, saint as you look—St Anthony if you like. She really is uncommonly pretty, though. I liked that dove-scene, too; natural evidently—but she can’t be that old rag-and-famish dog-stealer’s daughter. The idea of Harry flying out like that! The beggar was jealous, I’ll swear. Well, let him go if he can’t act like a man of the world.”

Harry Clayton did not mutter as he went to his room, but thoughts of a troublous nature came quickly. It was only by an effort that he composed himself to write a calm cool letter to Sir Richard Redgrave, stating nothing relative to what had passed, but merely asking him to make fresh ar-

rangements respecting his son, if he still wished him to have the counterpoise of a quiet companion, since it was the writer's wish to return immediately to Cambridge.

"Like giving up the fight—a complete coward!" said Harry, as he read over his note, and then he sighed and closed it up so that he might not falter in his determination. Then he sat by the window thinking, but not as had been his wont, for strange thoughts would intrude themselves in spite of each angry repulse; and when at last he retired, it was not to rest, but to lie tossing in a fevered manner, fighting with fancies which he could not control.

The rising sun, as it gilded chimney and house-top, found Harry pale and wakeful as he had been through the night, and he rose to sit by the open window, gazing out upon the quiet streets, clear now and bright in the early morning, and with hardly a wayfarer to be seen; but even the calmness of the only quiet hour in London streets failed to bring the peace he sought.

In due course came a letter from Sir Richard Redgrave, expressing sorrow that

Harry should so soon be obliged to return to the University, but wishing him all success in his studies, ending with a hope that the writer would see him high up in the honour-list, and hinting how gratifying it would have been could he have inoculated Lionel with a little of his application.

That same morning Harry had a hard fight with self.

"I've done all I could," he exclaimed ; "I'll go back and forget."

An hour after he was with Lionel, who could hardly at the last bring himself to believe that Harry was in earnest ; but the affair was serious enough he found, as he accompanied his friend to the Shoreditch Station, staying upon the platform till Harry had taken his seat, and then, with rather a formal hand-shake, the young men parted.

They were not to separate, though, without Lionel sending a sharp pang through Harry's breast, as he said, mockingly—

"Any message for Decadia?"

Harry Clayton's reply was a cold, bitterly reproachful look ; but as the train glided out into the open air, he threw himself back,

smiling sadly as he gazed with a newly-awakened interest at the dense and wretched neighbourhood on either hand, with its thronging population, and roofs devoted often to the keeping of birds, many of which were also hung from miserable poverty-stricken windows, whose broken panes were patched with paper or stuffed with rags.

On went the train, momentarily gathering speed, till, as he saw one iridescent pigeon alight cooing upon a brick parapet, Harry Clayton's brow wrinkled, and he compressed his lips as if with pain.

An instant and the train had glided by, and the pigeon was lost to view ; and as he mused upon the troubles of the past, his broken home at Norwood, and his determination to leave London for a time, the young man whispered to himself softly—

“It's a dream—a dream of folly and weakness, and it was time that I was rudely awakened.”

## CHAPTER IV.

### JARED'S HOME.

"WELL, Mr Ruggles, and how is little Pine?" said Mrs Jared, entering the room in Duplex Street, where industrious Tim was busily at work.

"Don't know what to say, ma'am," said Tim; "but somehow I fancy she's better since I changed her oil. This one seems to agree with her different to what the last one did. Oils varies a deal."

"No doubt," said Mrs Jared, smiling; "but I should have more faith in keeping her well wrapped up and out of the night air."

"I do keep her out of it, ma'am," said Tim, talking away, but busy still over his work. "I take all the care I can of her; but what we want is warm weather to bring her round. Summer weather's what we want; and there's such a very little of it yet. It's like everything else in London, ma'am—terribly adulterated. The oil's adulterated, the milk's



adulterated, bread 's adulterated ; everything is, ma'am, more or less, that we poor people buy ; and I know we pay ten per cent. more for our things, ma'am, than the rich do ; while, because things ain't bad enough for us, we get our fresh air stale and fouled with blacks. As for our summer, what we get of it, that's all adulterated with cold biting easterly winds. Summers seem to me, ma'am, to get shorter every year ; but, for all that, I shall be glad when the summer does come." And then, to give emphasis to his remarks, Tim brought his iron down thump upon the floor where he was seated.

Then there was a busy pause, during which time Jared was inspecting the lungs of a concertina, and, by means of his glue-pot, affixing soft patches of leather inside where failing spots were visible, Mrs Jared dividing her time between helping Patty over some garment and nursing the youngest Pellet, who sat watching Janet, staying with them for the evening.

" Strange thing this—terribly strange thing this about our poor-box, isn't it ? " said Jared. " Seems that there's no mistake about it ;

but that it has been robbed again and again. Mrs Ruggles told you, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, yes," said Tim; "quite startled me, it did. But there! Lord bless you, sir, there's people in this great London of ours would rob themselves, let alone other people, or church, or poor-boxes."

"Ah!" said Jared, "it is startling. Mr Timson's been talking to me about it. Sovereign of the vicar's one time, half-a-crown another, crown-piece another. No doubt about it, for it seems Mr Gray's been trying experiments."

"Experiments!" said Mrs Jared.

"Yes; setting traps to find out the offender."

"But, surely, it must be a mistake," said Patty. "No one would be so wicked as to rob a church."

"Well, I don't know, my dear; money's money," said Jared; "and your Uncle Richard says it's everything. There are plenty of people who value money more than religion."

Jared was silent for business reasons now, since he was holding a piece of leather in his

mouth, his hands being occupied by the concertina-bellows and glue-brush.

"You're about right, sir," put in Tim, who was busy over a shrinking operation upon one of Jared's waistcoats, a proceeding which left room for the elision of the worn parts, so that it might fit a small person. "No idea, I s'pose, of who it could be, sir?"

"Not the slightest," replied Jared, after placing his piece of leather *in situ*, and then preparing, with his scissors, a scrap for another part. "Glad if I had, for the rascal deserves to be punished. A man who would rob the poor, would rob—would—would do anything. Stir the fire under the glue-pot, Patty, my dear. Puts one in mind of a camp-kettle, don't it?" he said, as the young girl stirred the glowing coals, and made the flame dance about the little vessel, hung from a hook in the chimney.

The little iron kettle began to sing, and Tim raised his eyes above his spectacles to peer round the room before taking a fresh hold of the garment upon which he was employed.

"Ah!" said Jared, after an interval of

silence, "it's a strange thing about that money. Poor Mr Gray's in a sad way about it. He named it to me—says it's so grievous, and that he thinks more of the crime than of the value of the money twenty times over."

## CHAPTER V.

### TIMSON'S CONSISTENCY.

JARED PELLET was right. Mr Gray was in a sad way about the affair, for it was a problem that he was not likely to solve. At first he had made a point of keeping the matter secret, but as months slipped by, and no discovery was made, he ceased to be reticent. Nothing was learned as to the cause, but the effect was plain enough—the money still went. He held long consultations with Mr Timson, and together, more than before, they set to and suspected everybody connected with the church, beginning, jestingly, with themselves, and then going downwards through the other churchwardens, Jared, the clerk, Purkis, Mrs Ruggles, Ichabod Gunniss, and the bellringers, who never entered the church. But, though every one was suspected in turn, no accusation was made; for, said the vicar—

“Timson, I would not, in my weak, short-

sighted way, be guilty of an act of injustice to any man!"

"Why not set the police to work?" said Mr Timson. "A detective would furridge the matter out."

"No," said the vicar, "I don't like the idea. I would not care if they'd rob me, Timson, but they will not; and this business is something I really cannot get over. If I put more in the box to make up what I reckon may be the deficiency, it seems to make no difference; and though your advice may be good, I don't feel as if I could take it. I have acted upon some of your hints, but still we don't find anything out."

Mr Timson shook his head, and said, "Just so," which might have meant anything.

After smoking a pipe or two, the churchwarden always left, declaring that he had got hold of the right end of the thread, and that he intended following up the clue, telling it mysteriously, and promising news by his next visit; for, being old and single, the vicar thought it no shame to play nightly at cribbage with his churchwarden, and in his

company to smoke long clay pipes and drink whisky and water. But the only result of Mr Timson's clue-following was the getting of himself into a tangle, and, to the vicar's great disgust, he would seriously settle the offence upon a fresh head each time.

"I tell you what it is, Timson," he one day exclaimed, pettishly, after listening for some time to the rumbling of the churchwarden's mountain, and then being rewarded with no grand discovery, but a very mouse of an information,—“I tell you what it is, Timson, you are getting into your dotage.”

“No, I ain't,” said Timson, gruffly; for Mr Timson's life had two phases—as Mr Timson, tea-dealer, and Mr Timson, vicar's churchwarden. In trade he metaphorically wore his apron fastened by a brass heart and a steel hook, and said, “Sir” to the world at large; while, as Mr Timson, the worthy old bachelor, who could have retired from business any day, and who smoked pipes and played cribbage at his own or the vicar's residence, he was another man, and as sturdy and independent as an Englishman need be. “No, I ain't,” he said, gruffly. “I'm sure

now as can be that it's old Purkis—a fat, canting, red-faced, hypocritical old sinner.”

“Don't be so aggravating, Timson,” said the vicar. “How can you accuse him!”

“Why what does he mean by always hanging about the boxes, and polish, polish, polishing them till the steel-work grows quite thin?”

“That proves nothing,” said the vicar.

“Don't it?” exclaimed the churchwarden. “It proves that he has always been hanging about, till the money tempted him, and he could not resist it.”

“Nonsense!” said the vicar, crossly, as he broke a piece off his pipe. “Why, the very last time you were here, you were quite sure that it was Pellet.”

“Well, and so I'll be bound to say that it was,” said Timson. “I was sure of it last week, only you would not have it that I was right.”

“Of course not,” said the vicar, “when you declared only two days before that it was the organ-boy, whom you had caught spending money. How much did he spend, by the by?”



"Well, only a halfpenny at a potato-can, certainly," said Timson; "but he must have been flush of money."

"Pish!" ejaculated the vicar, contemptuously,—"nonsense!"

"Ah! you may say 'Pish,'" exclaimed Timson, angrily; "but it isn't nonsense. The money goes, don't it? and they're all in it, every man jack of 'em. It's a regular conspiracy."

"I never in all my experience met with a less consistent man than you are, Timson," said the vicar. "I believe you would accuse me as soon as look at me, and then give some one else into custody for the theft."

"No, I shouldn't," grumbled Mr Timson. "We should have found it all out by this time, only you will be so obstinate. I'd soon find it out if I had my way."

"I do wish you would have a little more charity in you, Timson," continued the vicar, taking up and dealing the cards. "I honestly believe that if it had not been for me, you would have made two or three homes wretched by accusing people of the theft."

"No business to steal poor-box money,

then," said Mr Timson, through his nose, for his hands being occupied with his cards, his lips were tightly closed over the waxy end of his pipe. "It was Pellet, I'm sure."

"No more Pellet than it was Purkis," said the vicar. "I never knew a more quiet, respectable man."

"Nor a better organist, if he wouldn't be so long-winded," said Mr Timson, coolly.

"Nor a better organist," acquiesced the vicar. "Fifteen—six, and six are a dozen," he continued, throwing down his cards.

"Three, and one for his nob," said Mr Timson, following the example of his host; "and that's what I should give him, Mr Gray, if I knew who it was."

"Humph!" ejaculated the vicar, thoughtfully.

But in spite of his thoughtfulness he came no nearer to his point, and in the course of time the Rev. John Gray was distant, and then, in manner, apologetic, to all the church officials. He even went so far as to send the little asthmatical old razor-faced clerk a present, so as to set his own mind at rest for having judged him hastily. He had fresh

locks placed upon the boxes—locks with cunningly-devised keys, which the maker assured him it was impossible to imitate ; but a fortnight had not elapsed before the boxes were plundered again—the culprit apparently growing bolder with success.

The vicar grew more and more anxious. He was in dread now that the communion-plate might be taken, and, lest a raid should be made upon it, he watched it himself to and from the churchwarden's house.

At times, too, Mr Gray would feel almost disposed to take his friend's advice, and call in the aid of the police ; but even then he did not feel certain of success, and he shrank from such stringent measures on account of the publicity they would entail ; besides, he wished to discover the culprit himself, and take him to task, for he considered that his own conscience would be sufficient punishment so soon as he was detected.

In Duplex Street, the vicar's words were well taken into consideration, and the whole affair was canvassed with animation, Tim Ruggles the while listening attentively, and giving his opinion when asked, otherwise

perfectly silent, until, to use his own words, "he was set going."

"I like clergymen sometimes," said Tim, "and sometimes I don't; but this vicar of ours seems a man worth knowing. Mrs Ruggles says, sir, it's a pleasure to have anything to do for him, and she's a great judge of character, sir. But there are some parsons I never could like, for they're as easy and plausible as country solicitors, and that's saying a great deal. But really it does seem a wonder that this little matter is not found out. I'll talk to Mrs Ruggles about it again to-night—wonderful woman—I like to hear her opinion; full of point and keenness. Authority for saying so," muttered Tim, beneath his breath, for he had been taking himself to task for his frequent usage of this his favourite expression.

Conversation was here stayed by a terrible vocal explosion up-stairs, accompanied by cries for mother, the cause being that a juvenile member of the Pellet family had choked himself with an angular fragment of pudding, given to him by Mrs Jared to keep him out of mischief—a cold heavy pudding of a most

economical texture, frequently made in Jared's establishment, and called by him "extinguisher" from its wondrous power of putting out appetite to the last faint spark.

A due amount of patting and shaking sufficed to place the little sufferer in his normal state; and mother and father once more descended, to find Tim Ruggles ready for starting homeward, after exhibiting a newly-made pair of trousers—his first—upon the young gentleman for whom they were intended.

"Yes, sir," said Tim, taking up, in a most unexpected manner, the principal subject of the evening's conversation, "I'll have a long talk to Mrs Ruggles about it; and if I might ask it as a favour of you and Mrs Pellet, sir, please don't send anything any more for little Pine. I'm so much obliged, and thank you kindly; but Mrs Ruggles, sir, is a little bit particular upon some points, and just perhaps the least touch proud. I know you won't be offended with me for telling you."

Mrs Jared, who had on several occasions sent little delicacies that she thought the child

might fancy—poor people's delicacies—promised, and Tim left ; and probably from the sharp look-out kept by Mrs Ruggles after the conversation she had with her husband, for quite a month the vicar enjoyed peace of mind, from a feeling that the poor-box had not been disturbed.

"And a good job, too," said Mr Timson, one evening ; "for I'm quite sick of hearing sermons and texts about pieces of money—'render unto Cæsar,' or 'current money of the merchant,' or Achan's covetousness, or the Judas pieces of silver. You know they only did harm, acting like charity sermons, and making people get money ready, expecting to see a plate held at the door, and then, only naturally, dropping it into the poor-box, so as to give more plunder to the thief, who has been laughing at you all the time."

"For shame, Timson !" said the old clergyman, sternly. "Don't you think that even thieves have consciences ?"

"Humph ! well, I don't know," said Timson, "perhaps they have, but they don't keep them from stealing. But I thought you

said you would keep the subject out of your sermons?"

The vicar did not reply, but his eyes twinkled, and a dry little crease or two appeared at the corners of his mouth.

## CHAPTER VI.

### MRS JARED'S MANAGEMENT.

No doubt, if little Patty had been more highly educated, more refined, and had no more engrossing occupations than reading and paying visits, she too would have worn a Mariana-like aspect, and sighed more frequently. But though she often wept in secret, hers was so busy a life that she had but little time to mourn, and though she sighed to herself, and suffered too most keenly, her cheeks somehow would not grow pale or less sound, and the sorrow was hidden away deeply in her heart.

Mrs Jared knew a great deal, and kept finding out more and more; but the subject was tabooed, and though her tender heart yearned to condole with Patty and try to comfort her, yet long talks with Jared had schooled her to be silent, and poor Patty had no comforter save Janet, and even with her she refrained from fully opening her heart.



"Poor girl! I know she feels it keenly," said Mrs Jared to her husband on one occasion.

"Not she," said Jared. "It must be nearly forgotten by this time."

"Did I forget you, years ago?" said Mrs Jared, severely.

"Too good a memory, my dear," said Jared, smiling.

"Then don't talk such nonsense," said his wife. "What ideas you men do have of women's hearts, just because now and then you meet with some silly, flighty, coquettish thing, not without a heart, certainly, but with one that is worthless. Do you suppose that all girls' hearts are counterfeit coin?"

"Not I!" said Jared; "but it won't do. It is just as I thought at the time, and it always is the case with those red-hot sanguine fellows. All very well at first, but they cool down gradually, and then it's all over. You see we hear nothing at all of him now."

"I'm afraid he's ill," said Mrs Jared; "there must be something wrong."

"Wrong! well, yes, I suppose so," said Jared; "if it's wrong to get rich, it was

wrong of him to talk to our poor girl in the way he did ; and it's wrong of her to dream of it, if she still does, and it was wrong of you to expect that anything would ever come of it but sorrow, and it was wrong"——

"Wrong of you to go on talking in that way," said Mrs Jared, impetuously ; "and, for my part, I don't believe that it is as you say. There's some misfortune or something happened to him, or"——

"Don't, for goodness' sake, talk in that way to her," said Jared, "or you'll complete the mischief. It's as well as it is, and the sooner she forgets it all, the better. Nothing could ever have come of it, and I should never have given my consent, even if he had kept to his professed determination. Richard would always have been against it ; and, goodness knows, there's estrangement enough between us without our doing anything to increase the distance. Look at us : poor people, with poor-people friends,—old Purkis and Tim Ruggles, and those aristocrats in Decadia ; and then look at Richard and his"——

"Richard's a selfish"——

"Hush ! don't, please, dear," said Jared.

with a pained look ; and he laid his hand gently upon his wife's lips, when, smoothing her forehead, she exclaimed—

“ Well, I won't then ; but it does make me angry when I think of his money, and then of how poor we are, while somehow the poorer we get, the more tiresome the children grow. You've no conception how cross they are at times.”

“ Haven't I ? ” said Jared, drily.

“ No,” said Mrs Jared, impetuously ; “ how can you have ? ”

“ Did you wash the little ones this morning, my dear ? ” said Jared.

“ Wash them ! Why, of course ; at least Patty did, the same as usual.”

“ Notice anything peculiar between their shoulders, either of you—any strange sprouting growth ? ”

“ Goodness, gracious ! no,” exclaimed Mrs Pellet, with a shudder. “ Why, what do you mean ? Surely there's no dreadful infectious thing about for which they are sickening ? Surely Patty has brought home nothing from that dreadful place of Wragg's ? What do you mean ? ”

"Oh! nothing," said Jared, coolly; "only you seemed under the impression that the little ones were or ought to be angels, and I was anxious to hear of the advent of sprouting wings."

"Stuff!" ejaculated Mrs Jared; and then, directly after, "just look here at Totty's boots."

"Well, they are on the go," said Jared, turning the little leather understandings in his hands.

"On the go!" said his wife; "why they're quite gone. It does seem such a thing when he's rolling in riches!"

"Who? Totty?" said Jared, innocently.

"Stuff!" said Mrs Jared, in her impetuous way. "Why, Richard, to be sure. He could buy oceans of boots, and never feel the loss."

"Very true," said Jared, without pausing to think what number of pairs would form oceans. "But then, my dear, he'd have no Tottys to put in them."

"And a good thing, too," said Mrs Jared, "seeing what an expense they are."

"I don't know that, my dear," said Jared,

softly. "They are an expense certainly, and it does seem hard upon us; but I don't know, after all, but what ours is the happier home."

"The man came for the poor-rate to-day," said Mrs Jared, melting, but still frigid.

"That's nothing new, my dear," said Jared; "he's always coming. Our little ones are healthy and strong and happy."

"Have you thought about the rent being nearly due?" said Mrs Jared, who would not give in yet.

"Yes," said Jared; "I have thought about it, for I never get a chance of forgetting it, my dear. It always seems to me that there are eight quarters in poor people's years. But, as I was saying about the children, they are happy and merry, and the doctor comes seldom—that is," he said, with a comical look, "with exceptions, my dear—with exceptions."

Mrs Jared tried to knit her brows and frown, but she could not, for the corner of a smile would peep out at one angle of her mouth; and, somehow or other, as they sat alone by the fire that night, Jared's arm crept

round his wife's waist, and her head went down upon his shoulder.

"Plenty," said Jared, "certainly; but I don't think you would like to part with any one of them."

"Oh! how can you!" ejaculated Mrs Jared; and she quite shivered at the thought.

"And I never saw you obliged to make chest-warmers for them because they were delicate, or compelled to get cod-liver oil for them because they were thin and weak, and"——

"Oh! don't talk so, pray," exclaimed Mrs Jared. "That poor child! it gives me the heartache to see her, when Ruggles brings her with him. I'd give almost anything to have the poor little thing here for the short time she's for this world."

"Think she's so bad as that?" said Jared.

"Oh! yes; her poor little bones show so dreadfully. I don't think she's neglected, for Ruggles is too good-hearted for that; but that horrid woman would almost keep her from getting well. Now, if we had her with ours, and"——

"Didn't you say the collector called to-day?" said Jared.

"Yes," said his wife;—"had her here with ours, and Patty and I attended well to her, she might get through the winter, and—what did you say?"

"I didn't speak," said Jared. "I was only thinking about the rent."

"And, besides," said Mrs Jared, "as she is so young"—

"How much would a pair of boots cost for Totty?" said Jared.

"Really, it is too bad!" exclaimed Mrs Jared; "and I can't help thinking about the poor little thing."

"And how well and hearty our own are, even if we are poor," said Jared.

So Mrs Jared sighed, and contrived to put a patch on the side of Totty's boots, and they lasted another week.

## CHAPTER VII.

### BETWEEN FRIENDS.

FOR quite a month, as far as the vicar could tell, the poor-boxes had rest, and Mr Timson's ears were not so much troubled with the objectionable money texts. Divers games of cribbage were played, and divers pipes and glasses of gin-and-water enjoyed, as the late robberies were discussed. During these discussions the vicar would enlighten his crony upon the subject of the various plans he had adopted to see whether the boxes had been opened.

The matter was also freely discussed at Purkis's and Ruggles's, as well as at Duplex Street; the same verdict being arrived at in each house—namely, that it was very strange.

Mrs Purkis thought she could fit the cap on the right head if she had to do with the matter, and Mr Purkis told her to hold her tongue. Mrs Ruggles, too, gave a sidewise look at her husband, and told him that it was



not her business, but she could give a very shrewd guess at the culprit; though, when pressed on the subject, she only nipped her lips very tightly, and said, "Never mind."

As for Mrs Jared, she only declared it to be very sad, and then the matter was allowed to drop.

The vicar, too, seemed to have almost forgotten the matter, until one morning when he hurried into Mr Timson's counting-house, looking so much put out that the churchwarden directly guessed what was the matter, and before his friend could say a word, exclaimed—

"You don't mean it, sir?"

"But I do mean it, Mr Timson," said the vicar; "and really," he continued poking at the inkstand with the ferule of his umbrella—"and really, I should be glad if you would not treat this matter so lightly, sir. It grieves me very, very deeply, Mr Timson, I can assure you."

"Mind the ink, sir," said Mr Timson, placing the bright metal stand out of his visitor's reach. "I don't treat it lightly, sir. It's no joke, and I'm as much put out as

yourself. You don't think I want the poor-boxes robbed, do you, sir?" and he spoke with a puffing snort between every two or three words, as if getting warm.

"Now don't be rash, Timson—don't be rash. I'm not angry; only, really, you know, it is so worrying, so aggravating—deuced aggravating, I should say, if I were a layman, Timson, I should indeed. There, there! now don't bristle up, there's a good fellow; but tell me what to do."

"Take that umbrella ferule out of my ink, that's what you'd better do," said Timson, gruffly; for, in an absent fashion, the vicar was still thrusting at the metal stand, to the great endangering of an open book or two upon the table.

"There, there, there!" said the vicar, impatiently, as he placed the obnoxious ferule upon the floor, and pressed it down there with both hands. "Now, then, tell me, Timson, what had I better do?"

"How the devil should I know what you ought to do?" exclaimed Mr Timson, for he was out of temper that morning with business matters connected with a sudden

rise in teas, just at a time when his stock was low, in consequence of his having anticipated a fall, and the vicar, in his impatient mood, had applied the match which exploded Mr Timson's wrath, when, metaphorically taking off his apron, he spoke up.

"Don't swear, Timson," said the vicar, sternly; "'Swear not,'—you know the rest."

"Shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo!" ejaculated Mr Timson. "Who did swear?"

"Why you did, sir," said the vicar; "and don't deny it."

"But I didn't," exclaimed the churchwarden; "and I won't be spoken to like that in my own house. Because we have been friends all these years, John Gray, you presume upon it, and abuse me. I didn't swear; I only said, 'How the devil should I know?' and I say it again. Shoo—shoo—shoo! the devil's in the poor-box."

"If you make use of such language, Levi Timson, I must leave your office," said the vicar, severely.

"What language?—what language?" exclaimed the churchwarden.

"Why, such as yours, sir," retorted the vicar; "introducing the father of evil every moment."

"Not I!—not I!" exclaimed Timson. "Introduce him! Not I. Who brought him into the room? Who began it? Who said it first?"

"But only in a modified form," said the vicar, humbly; "I qualified it strongly with an 'if.' But I was wrong, extremely wrong, Timson; and there! I beg your pardon, Timson. I was put out and annoyed, and spoke hastily," and he held out his hand.

"No, sir; no, sir; you don't beg mine," said Timson, taking the vicar's hand. "I beg yours, sir. I know I spoke hastily, for I was angry and put out, for teas are gone up, confound 'em!"

"But I was in the wrong, Timson," said the vicar. "As a clergyman, I ought to have governed myself, and known better than to be hasty."

"I won't give up in my own premises, sir," exclaimed Timson. "Now, don't smile, sir; they're mine, bought and paid for, and there are the writings in that safe. I was in

the wrong; but teas are up horribly this morning, and I'd been reckoning on their going down."

Peace was ratified at once, for the two old men shook hands very solemnly for quite a minute.

"I'd give something, though, to find out about that money," said the vicar, "for, you see, it's going again."

"I can assure you, sir," said the churchwarden, "that I've slept night after night with those poor-boxes in bed with me, and yet I can't see through the thing anyhow. By the way, I have read of such things. You don't happen to be a somnambulist, do you? You haven't been of a night and emptied the poor-boxes in your dreams, scraping together a store, and hidden it away for your heirs, administrators, executors, and assigns to find out?" and as the old man spoke, he glanced round the room, as if seeking a likely spot for such a purpose.

"No, Timson, no," replied the vicar, smiling sadly. "You were present when my will was signed; and if there's anything

more than is set down on that piece of parchment, I freely give it to you, old friend."

"Verbal gifts don't go down with executors, sir," said Timson, with his eyes twinkling; "and besides, I don't think it would be the thing for me to stick to a hoard that you had filched from your own poor-box."

"There, there, there!" ejaculated the vicar. "You are talking nonsense, Timson."

"Mr Gray, sir," said the churchwarden, seriously, and with some feeling, "a glass of sherry with you, sir; and, though toasts have nearly gone out, I shall drink to your long life."

"Yes," continued the churchwarden, after a busy little pause, "it is a good glass of sherry. It is one of my weak points to have a decent glass in the house, and I don't know anything that I like better."

"Except a glass of hot toddy," said the vicar, smiling.

"Well, well, well, sir," said Timson; "suppose we put that aside, or we shall be getting into cribbage and pipes, and all sorts of other weak points."

"True," said the vicar; "but really, Timson, I'm not ashamed of those little weaknesses, even if I am a clergyman. I'm a very humble old fellow, with few friends, and fewer relatives. I don't belong to society, Timson, but keep to my quiet, old-fashioned, country ways, which I brought up with me out of Lincolnshire. I'm not a fashionable parson, Timson, but I try to do my best for those amongst whom I have to teach."

"You do, sir, you do," said the churchwarden, warmly; "and you make me disgusted with myself for being put out with your anxiety about this poor-box. Now let's set to and go over it all, quietly and methodically. What's to be done?"

"I don't know—I don't know," said the vicar, despondingly; "but we shall find him out to a certainty some day."

"Him!" exclaimed the churchwarden,—  
"him, sir?"

"Well, yes; him, or her, or it. I would not care if I could get just an inkling of who it could be. But I'm determined upon one thing, Timson, and that is, if there is much more of it, I will do away with the poor-

boxes altogether, and preach an extra charity-sermon every quarter ;” and the vicar tucked his umbrella beneath his arm, as if ready to go.

“ But I say, sir,” exclaimed Mr Timson, “ I would not bear it in mind quite so much.”

“ What do you mean, Timson ? ” said the vicar.

“ Texts, sir, texts ! ” said Mr Timson, drily.

“ Well, Timson, I won’t—I won’t, really ; though, between ourselves—as friends—as old friends you know—I don’t mind telling you, that I had been making up the heads of a discourse for next Sunday upon the parable of the lost piece of money. But I’ll take your advice, and try something else.”

“ Do ! ” said his friend, “ and let the matter rest. Don’t show that you notice it, sir ; be quite quiet, and we shall put them off their guard ; I’ve my suspicions yet ! ”

“ No, you have not, Timson,” said the vicar, laughing, “ not you. You’re not a suspicious man, and never were.”

“ Nor you neither,” said the tea-dealer, shaking hands. “ Good morning.”

And as his old friend went through the



busy portion of the house, raising his hat in reply to the salute of clerks and warehousemen, the churchwarden muttered to himself, "A thorough gentleman!"

An opinion from which some people differed.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE ST RUNWALD'S MYSTERY.

GENTLEMANLY or ungentlemanly, to blame in making a friend of the churchwarden, a tea-dealer, or not, the vicar was thoroughly conscientious, and this constant plundering of a little store intended for the poor of the parish was a sore and festering thorn in his side. It may be questioned, though, whether the poor really were sufferers by the thefts. More probably they were gainers; for, ignorant of the amount pilfered, and feeling that to a certain extent the little fund was in his charge, the vicar would often drop a sovereign or two into the little heap when the boxes were emptied, in order to make up the deficiency, which might, perhaps, in fact, be not more than a few shillings.

But it was in vain that the good vicar fidgeted and fretted, rubbing his hair into all sorts of shapes, and especially that of a silver flame issuing from the top of his head.

The pilfering went on, now ceasing for a while, now re-commencing, while the simple expedient of emptying the boxes after each service was never thought of by any one.

Mr Purkis grew warm, and perspired as he sand-papered the steel bindings, making the boxes glisten to an extent that would never have been reached, had there not existed the little jealousy between Mrs Ruggles and himself.

Not that Mr Purkis loved work, for his was the kind of constitution that would bear a large amount of ease, and he always felt himself to flourish most when clothed in his robes of office, and basking in beauty's eye as he ornamented the church porch, striking with awe the boys from Gunniss's, his duties appearing to consist of an occasional wag of the head to the pew-opener, when some stranger required a sitting, and a majestic roll as far as the iron gates and back.

He would wag his head mysteriously at his wife when she was brushing him down on a Sunday morning, and removing every speck of dust from his blue robe, to which she

used a hard brush, while the broad scarlet velvet cape, with its deep gold-lace trimming, was daintily smoothed and dusted with a brush of the softest. Then Mrs Purkis would hand her lord his cocked hat and white Berlin gloves, gazing up in his face and looking him over with the greatest veneration. For some ladies are fond of seeing their lords and masters in uniform, and Mrs Purkis was one of these, and she would stand at the door to see her husband go down the street, exclaiming too, angrily, to herself, "Drat them boys!" when some evil-disposed irreverent young scamp would shout after the portly officer, "Beadle, beadle, threadle my needle;" though she consoled herself with the recollection that, "Boys allus was full of their sarse," ready to laugh at any of our noble British institutions, especially if relating to law and order, beginning with the majestic policeman, and ending with the Lord Chief-Baron in his swaddling clothes.

But if Mr Purkis looked sagacious, it seemed probable that, like other people, he only had his suspicions; such too as he could not confirm, though a slight frown and a

shake of the head, particularly if accompanied by nipped-together lips, imply a great deal ; and your heavy-cheeked solid-headed judge will carry a weight with the public that his keen-witted and sharp-featured subordinate will lack.

Mr Purkis obtained the credit of knowing a great deal, but if he did, he kept the knowledge to himself ; and Time, the inexorable, slipped on, Jared discoursing with his organ, and the great congregation at St Runwald's listening patiently to the vicar's quiet practical little sermons.

Mr Gray kept his promise to the churchwarden, and there were no more texts for some time touching upon the subject of money ; but Mr Timson scratched his head violently one day as he sat in his pew and heard the vicar dwell upon the rich men dropping their gifts into the treasury, and the poor widow's mite ; adroitly introducing his opinion that it was as great a sin to steal the widow's mite as the more imposing gifts of the wealthy.

"But I wouldn't really, you know," said Timson, the next time they met ; "as I've

told you before, it's only putting the thieves on their guard, and can do no good."

"Might work on their consciences, Timson, eh? Startle them into better ways and feelings." But the churchwarden shook his head. "Think not, eh?" said the vicar; "conscience makes cowards of us all, as Milton says."

"Shakspeare, Shakspeare, sir," said Timson.

"My memory's failing fast, Timson," said the old man, sadly; "but I thought it was Milton. You don't read the poets?"

"Never, by any chance," said Timson; "but I know I heard those words at old Drury, and I know they don't put Milton on the stage."

"I believe you're right—I believe you're right, Timson," said the vicar. "And so you really would not say any more about it publicly?"

"Not a word," said Timson, firmly.

"But it was neatly introduced, eh?"

"Yes, ye—e—e—s," said Timson; "but it does no good, depend upon it, sir. The man who takes money from a church

won't be frightened because you tell him it's wicked."

"Think not?" said the vicar.

"Sure of it," said Timson.

Timson was right, for the money still went, week after week—shillings and half-crowns, and sixpences and florins. Purkis groaned and grunted as he polished off the rust that would collect on the steel-work, as much at the labour as at the losses; but he could not see the money take to itself wings and fly away. Jared and Ichabod came and went, and the harmonies flooded the old church, but they saw nothing. Vicar and church-warden gazed about as they came and went, and shook their heads at the boxes, but they went away as wise as they came. Neither did Mrs Ruggles unravel the mystery when she came on Saturdays to set open the doors, and swept and dusted, and punched pulpit pillows, and walloped (Ichabod's own term) pew cushions, and banged hassocks in the porch, finishing her duties by perversely shifting people's prayer-books and church-services from pew to pew, starting them upon voyages round the church—trips which some-

times occupied whole months—while, more than once she obtained rewards, when, by request, she hunted out and restored the missing volumes.

But though the officials saw not the thief, some of those fat-cheeked, half-dressed, trumpet-blowing angels must have beheld, and, herald-like, might have proclaimed the offender with the sound of the trump.

The marble effigy of the statesman who stood with scroll in outstretched hand, as if in debate, must have seen the culprit; while Edward Lawrence, citizen of London, and Dame Alys, his wife, intent though they were in prayer upon their marble cushions, might have stolen one stony glance upon the sacrilege committed.

Why! there were effigies poised and planted everywhere about the old edifice, which the good knight and architect, Sir Christopher Wren, had restored when it was crumbling and dilapidated inside—restored most fully, according to the sublime taste of his period; but none of these effigies told tales, not even David, who stood within three feet of one box, and busily harped away, so busily indeed,



that he had lost his garments, probably in the heat of the work, for there was no Michal at hand to take him to task.

Time did not tell either, at least not at this period of the story, though he, too, commanded a good view of the church, as he stood upon a bracket on one side of the chancel-arch, mowing away with a broken scythe, like a ragged Irishman in the hay-making season, his hour-glass being slung at his side, after the fashion of Pat's bottle.

Grim Death, in skeleton form, who stood as counterbalance to Time on the other side of the arch, pickaxe in one hand, dart in the other, also maintained a stubborn silence, perhaps because offended, for though most people considered that he held a pickaxe for grave-digging purposes, there were others who insisted upon its being a cross-bow with which he was armed.

As for the stained-glass cherubim and seraphim, playing guitar, bass viol, cornet, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, they seemed to be too busy with their heavenly harmonies to notice such mundane matters as pounds, shillings, and

pence. Judas, the bag-bearer, was not visible, or—on the principle of “set a thief to catch a thief”—he might have told tales; but painted on the ceiling were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—well painted too, though the artist’s evangelical emblems of bull, eagle, and lamb were not quite up to nature.

But none of these pointed out the offender, and the old vicar walked disconsolately up and down his church, pausing here and there as if lost amidst the different surmises which flooded his brain; but there was no information to be gained. The mystery was not concealed amongst the carved oak window draperies, and cottage pattern wood-work, which hid the stone tracery of the old east window; it was not behind the spindle balustrade communion rails, nor the iron-barred workhouse-window-like rood-screen, nor in the brass-nailed, red-curtained, soft-cushioned, high-sided pews, where City folk loved to snooze on Sundays.

The mystery continued, but it was invisible, and though poor Mr Gray looked appealingly at the cross-legged Templar upon his back, and at the brasses rescued from trampling

feet to be fixed in the wall, neither father nor mother, nor right or left, one of the step-like regular sons and daughters, brazen-faced as they were, whispered him a word more than did the black, fork-tongued, barb-tailed, huge-clawed, ancient stained-glass devil, so busy watching the Virgin and Child in the clerestory window.

So the Reverend John Gray sighed, and softly rubbed his hands, and the poor-boxes were still robbed.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE LOVE OF NATURE.

HARRY CLAYTON had been gone three months, and, clothed in a perfect Joseph's coat of a dressing-gown, Lionel Redgrave lolled upon his sofa, talking pettishly to his landlord, who stood before him holding a slip of paper in his hand.

"Cert'nly, sir, it goes again the grain," said Mr Stiff; "but what am I to do, Mr Redgrave, sir? Here's the cheque again from your 'pa, and there's the receipt, all as regular as the month comes round, which is more than can be said of some people with titles and who calls themselves officers. You see, you know, sir, I rent the whole of this upper of the people who has the shop, and I'm bound not to do nothing as shall annoy them in their business."

"Bother!" growled Lionel, fidgeting about, while Mr Stiff went on—

"I wouldn't part with you, sir, only you

see, if so be I don't, why, they'll part with me."

"But it's a nuisance, man, and I should have to look out for fresh chambers," said Lionel; "and the place suits me. I don't want to go."

"Well, you see, sir, that's where we agree. But you see, things can't go on like this. *One* dog we didn't like, but we'd say nothing about it, though he don't do no good to the cushins; but look there, sir—there's your bull-tarrier on the couch—your Skye wiry on the heasy-chair—your spannel under the table, as vicious as stinging nettles; and them two pugs on the hearthrug,"

Lionel made a hasty gesture.

"Can't help it, sir; it ain't no good for you to be cross; I must speak. Then there's the Cunnle as has the second floor—Cunnle Mart'nitt, sir—says if that there parrot don't go, he will; for it's a shrieking and swearing from morning to night. Not as I must say as ever I did hear it say anything worse than 'Corpus backus,' which may be wickedness in Greek or some other furren tongue; like an old master of mine who was a major

in the Indian army, and came back eat up with curry, and bad liver—yellow as one of his own guineas, sir. Well, he'd swear at me, sir, hawful I do believe ; but then as it was all in Hindoo, and I never understood a word about what it meant, it never used to fidget me a bit more than if it was all blessings. But parrots will swear, sir, I know ; for I've heard two in a cage go on at one another worse than"——

"Do you want me to set to and swear at you, Stiff?" said Lionel.

"No, sir, as you'd be too much of a gentleman, I'm sure."

"Pish!" ejaculated Lionel.

"Then the Cunnle says, sir, as the singin' birds is getting a perfect nuisance ; but the squirrel and the ferrets, he says as he don't mind. But now I'm speaking, sir, I must say as I do ; for I put it to you, sir, are they sootable for a first-floor in Regent Street? I know what gents is, sir, having lived in good families till the wife and me retired on her savings and took to letting ; and I must say, sir, as I never in all my experience see anything like this here before ; while the worst

of it is as we never know what's coming next. It drives my missus a'most wild, it do indeed, sir, to see that little foxy old chap with the thick boot come jigging and grinning up to the door as if he'd got a hingin inside to work him, and now bringing a bird, or a hanimal, or something else to wherrit us."

"Nearly done?" growled Lionel, angrily.

"Not quite, sir," said the landlord, desperately; for he had been lectured into speaking to his perverse lodger, and he knew that the ear of his lecturer was at the key-hole. "You see, sir, my wife says as we must have an alteration. She says only last night, 'James,' she says—it was after we was in bed, sir—'how do we know what Mr Redgrave 'll be a havin' next? He's a makin' a reg'lar Wombwell's show of that drawing-room, as we shall have to re-furnish as soon as ever he's gone, what with tobacco-smoke, dirty feet, and wild beasts. We shall be having a helephant or a monkey next; and with a monkey in the house,' she says, 'I won't put up. For, if there is a ojus thing as I can't abear, it's a monkey. What does a gent like him, with his father a barrynit, want

with tortushes a-screaming about the room, and under your feet, and giving you a turn as sends cold shudders all down your back?"

"Now, look here!" burst out Lionel; "I'm not going either to stand or to believe all this, so I tell you. You want to raise the rent, Stiff. Now that's it."

"Which it just ain't nothink of the sort, Mr Redgrave!" exclaimed a corroded voice—sharp, worn, and acid—and a new actor appeared on the scene, in the person of Mrs Stiff, the landlord's lady. "I wonder, sir, at a gentleman—a nobleman's son—bemeaning himself to insult honest people in this way. We don't want the rent raised, sir; but what we do want is a halteration, or else our rooms empty, or let to some one else, as there's plenty of gents as would be glad to have them; though, if you was to go, no one would be sorrier than I should, to lose you, sir."

Lionel made a gesture of dismay, throwing himself farther back upon his lounge, with every token of succumbing to this fresh attack, as he stared grimly at the ceiling.

"You see, sir," said Mrs Stiff, for her hus-



band, literally as well as metaphorically, had now subsided into the background, "ever since Mr Clayton, as was as nice and pleasant a gent as ever walked in shoe-leather, has been gone, things has been growing worse. We ain't the folks, sir, to take notice of late hours, or smoking, or friends to supper, as won't go in Hansom cabs without a noise, and a bit of racketing now and then—of course not. We know our place, sir, and what gents is—young and old—as lives in eligibly-situated bachelor chambers, overlooking one of the best streets in the metropolis; but I put it to you, sir, as a gent of sense, is *that* right—and THAT—and THAT?"

Mrs Stiff's forefinger was pointed at first one and then another quadru- or bi-ped intruder.

"Ever since Mr Clayton's been gone, sir, here you've had these things a coming in. And now, is it right, sir? Is tortushes—six of 'em—proper things to be a scrawming over a Brussels carpet as cost us six-and-six a yard, without the planning and making? And let me tell you, sir, as six-and-sixes to buy yards of carpet ain't scraped out of the

gutters ; let alone the other expenses of furnishing a house, with upholsterers and furniture shops thrusting veneer down your throat when you go in for solid ; and if, to save your money, you go to one of the auction-rooms, you're a'most ragged to pieces by the Jew brokers ; and if you won't employ 'em, them a-running up things and bidding against you shameful. Furnishing a house don't mean marrying a lady and putting her in it, I can tell you, Mr Redgrave, sir ; and when it's your own Brussels as you're a walking on, and your own sofas as you sit on, you won't destroy 'em with all sorts of nasty filthy animals, as is that full of insecks as makes it miserable to come in the room."

"Now, look here!" exclaimed Lionel, whose countenance wore a comical aspect of trouble and despair,—“look here!” he exclaimed, starting up ; “I don't want to go—I don't want the trouble. There, I'll promise you, I won't buy any more, will that suit you ? ”

But the long-suffering Mrs Stiff was now fully roused, and determined to hold the

ground which she had gained. She said, and very justly, that she could not afford to go on upon such terms, as the result must be notice to quit from their own landlord. She was determined now to have a thorough clearance, or Mr Redgrave must get apartments where people did not mind having their rooms made into a "wild beast show."

This being the climax of Mrs Stiff's speech, that lady flounced out of the room, the centre of an ærial vortex raised by her voluminous garments, leaving Lionel Redgrave and his landlord staring very hard at one another.

"I say, you know, what's to be done?" said the young man, at last.

Mr Stiff shook his head as solemnly as a sexton welcoming a fully furnished funeral, when, leaping up angrily, to his landlord's great astonishment, Lionel threw up the window, and then, though not without some difficulty, set at liberty the whole of his birds, the parrot rewarding him for his kindness by nipping a piece out of his finger.

"There, now!" said Lionel, binding a

handkerchief round his bleeding finger, after directing a blow right from the shoulder at the offending parrot, which, it is hardly necessary to say, missed its aim—"there now! take those empty cages away, and send the girl to sweep up the bits."

Mr Stiff winked to himself as he obeyed, and rattled out of the room with quite a load of cages, but only to return at the end of five minutes.

"Well," said Lionel, inquiringly, "what now?"

"About them there ferrets, sir?" said Mr Stiff.

"Oh! take them away by all means," said Lionel, impatiently.

"Yes, sir, in course; but what shall I do with them?"

"Wring their necks—sell them—send them down the drains after the rats," exclaimed Lionel; and the wire-fronted box, containing the furry, snakey animals, was carried down; but only for Mr Stiff to return at the end of ten minutes, hot, henpecked, and nervous, to encounter Lionel's savage glances.

"Well, what next?" cried the young man to the troubled ambassador, who, open to receiving both fires, had now come charged with a message which he hardly dared to deliver, for, after the sweep made of birds and cages, he felt that it was rather dangerous to ask for fresh concessions, and therefore he remained silent until Lionel fiercely repeated his question.

"Please, sir, there's them tortushes," said Stiff, at last.

"Con-found the tortoises!" cried Lionel; "give them to some of the street-boys." And, moving to the window, he hailed a doctor's boy passing with his medicine-basket. "Catch, my lad," he shouted; and he threw him down—one after the other—three of the sluggish little reptiles, with heads and legs drawn within their shells so as to be out of danger. "Now, I hope you are satisfied," he said to his landlord; who, after a good hunt, had continued to discover in out-of-the-way corners the other three offenders.

Mr Stiff's only response was a shake of the head—a motion kept up until he reached the lower regions, whence he returned, more

hot and flustered than ever, to be greeted with a storm of abuse from his angry young tenant.

No, he would not give up the dogs, that he wouldn't, and Mr Stiff might go and tell his wife so. He had already thrown away above thirty pounds' worth of things to satisfy them. He gave twelve pounds for that parrot, he said, and now they wanted him to part with his dogs. Why! he had only got back the bull-terrier after paying ten pounds one day, and five the next, through losing it in Decadia, let alone the heavy sums he had paid for the others. Part with his dogs! No, that he wouldn't, so there was an end of it; and if Mr Stiff came bothering him again, hang him if he wouldn't serve him as he had served the tortoises.

There might have been an end of it, so far as Mr Stiff was concerned; but when he returned to the kitchen, he was soon sent back to the drawing-room, with fresh diplomatic charges, which he delivered in spite of the window-throwing threat; but, still failing to make satisfactory arrangements, he was accompanied in a further visit to the first-floor

by the irate landlady herself—hot, out of breath, and voluminous in her discourse.

And now the wordy warfare recommenced, charge after charge being made by Mrs Stiff, to the discomfiture of Lionel Redgrave, till a truce had been agreed upon : the young tenant was to retain his chambers on condition that he brought no more “wild beasts” or birds—so Mrs Stiff put it—and did not, as, one by one, the four dogs he was allowed to keep were lost, either try to recover them, or supply their places with fresh favourites.

“Confound the pair!” cried Lionel, as they left the room ; and, according to custom, proceeded to solace himself with a cigar.

“I don’t care,” exclaimed Mrs Stiff, as she reached her best kitchen, and sat down panting ; “we ought to have persevered, and then we should have had the house clear of his rubbish. How do we know how long the silly young noodle—all money and no brains—will be before he loses even one of his dogs ?”

“Don’t you fret about that,” laughed her husband ; “that won’t be long first. Why, he never hardly goes out now without some ill-

looking vagabond dodging him ; and there's one in particular follows him home as regular as clockwork. Do you think he's always slinking about for nothing? Not he. You wait a bit, and you'll see."

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## CHAPTER X.

### MUTTERINGS.

D. WRAGG was out on business, down by the docks. He had left home directly after breakfast, telling his lodger, the little Frenchman, that he was "good to buy five hundred of zebras, or a hundred of grays, or a miscellaneous assortment of anything fresh brought over ;" and he tapped his breast-pocket as he spoke, winking and jerking himself up and down.

"Dessay I could find a customer for a monkey, if I brought one home."

A sharp glance was directed at Patty by Janet, as the dealer spoke ; for Wragg's absence being likely to last the whole day, while Canau's engagements would occupy him for a considerable portion of it, Mrs Pellet had been persuaded to let Patty come and bear her friend company during the time when she would otherwise have been left alone in charge of D. Wragg's stock-in-trade.

"Coming back," said D. Wragg, "I shall see about the four-wheeler, so as we can go down comfortable. What time shall we start?"

He looked at Janet as he spoke, but she was thoughtful and silent; coming back though into the present, upon being again addressed.

"All right, then!" said D. Wragg; "to-morrow morning, directly arter breakfast, say half arter eight, and that will be nine; and you and Mother Winks will be sure and get a basket all ready."

D. Wragg took his departure, after an affectionate glance all round at the birds and the rest of his stock-in-trade, while the little Frenchman stood lighting his cigarette with the match handed him by Janet.

"You will stay with Janet?" he said to Patty, as he turned to go.

"Yes; she has promised," said Janet, quickly; "but you will be back in an hour to paint the birds?"

"Good! yes, in one hour;" and raising his hat, he replaced it, old and pinched of brim, very much on one side, and sauntered out.

The two girls, left now alone, stood silently in the shop for a few minutes, and then entered the back-room, where, in a quiet, pre-occupied manner, Janet commenced arranging cardboard, gum, and various packets of feathers, upon the table; an operation interrupted almost directly by a loud tapping upon the shop-counter.

Patty turned to answer the summons for her friend, but, on reaching the glass-door, she started back, looking pale and anxious.

"Oh, pray go!" she whispered to Janet, whose dark eyes were fixed maliciously upon her.

"So it is the gay cavalier, is it?" laughed Janet, in a harsh angry fashion.

"No, no!" whispered Patty, "but that dreadful man. He follows me, and always comes to the shop when he thinks I am here."

"I'll answer him," said Janet, fiercely; and then in a whisper, "should you have turned back if it had been some one else?"

Patty's sole reply was a look of reproach, one, though, that spoke volumes, as the deformed girl left the room to encounter the

heavy, surly-voiced young man, who, upon being sharply asked what he wanted—

“ Didn’t quite know. Perhaps it were a bird, or it might be a ferret; but he wasn’t quite sure. How-so-be, *she* wasn’t the one as was in the shop the other day. Where was the other one? Oh! she was busy, was she? Then p’raps he’d call again;” after which the heavy gentleman loitered slowly out of the shop, to hang about the window, glancing in at the birds and chewing straws.

“ He’s gone!” said Janet, returning to the room. “ He’s a hideous wretch, ugly as I am. Such impudence! He did not want to buy anything. But what a little coward you are!”

“ Yes,” sighed Patty, “ I am—I know I am. Ah! Janet,” she continued, after a short pause, “ I wish I were a lady!”

“ For the sake of the gay cavalier, of course,” laughed Janet, sneeringly, and then she looked angrily across at her companion, who bent her head, whispering to herself—

“ She won’t believe me—she won’t believe me.”

Janet's long fingers now grew very busy over her work, as she nimbly arranged the wing, tail, back, and breast feathers of a partridge, with gum, upon a stiff piece of card, following, with an accuracy learned of the birds amongst which she had so long dwelt, the soft curves and graceful swellings of the natural form, making up pair after pair of ornaments, destined, after being finished off by Canau, and prettily mounted, to be disposed of by D. Wragg at a profitable rate.

Punctual to his time, the little Frenchman returned, and, quite at home, sauntered into the room.

"Good girls! good girls!" he said, lightly. "Now the colours and the brush. Did the Madame Vinks bring the music she said she would borrow from the *chef d'orchestre*? No? Ah! then, but I am disappoint, and must wait. Janet, that bird is too big—round—plump—too much like the Madame Vinks; but we will paint his beak and leg. He does look fit for the *chef*—the cook—and not for the ornament."

Then taking up cakes, first of one colour and then of another, he moistened a camel's

hair pencil in the gum, and, with the skill of a finished artist, gave the finishing touches, beaks, eyes, legs, to the young girl's work.

In the midst of the operation, though, there was again the sound of a step in the shop.

Patty rose and left the room, for Janet's fingers were busy with the feathers, and she determined this time not to let cowardice prevent her from doing her friend the little service. The deformed girl's manner, however, evinced but little gratitude for the act, for she sat with bent head, but flashing eyes and distended nostrils, eagerly listening to catch the slightest word.

And eager whispered words those seemed to her to be, but replied to only in monosyllables, and at last, when she raised her head and gazed through the open door, she winced as if she had been struck, on seeing a be-ringed hand stretched across the counter, and tightly holding one of Patty's little white palms.

Janet did not heed that the young girl seemed to be vainly trying to release that hand, as she stood right back against the cages at the side of the shop.

It was a bright hot summer day, with window and door open, so as to catch every wandering breeze that might lose itself in the vast maze of bricks and mortar; and as Janet had that one glance in at the shop, the door of communication banged loudly, and her view was cut off.

For a moment the girl's face was contracted by pain; then a fierce malicious look swept over it as she rose to re-open the door.

"No, no—no, no, *mon enfant*; let the door rest," said Monsieur Canau. "Wait till I have finished this one bird. Patty will be here directly."

Janet shrunk back into her chair, craning her neck forward, though, as she tried in vain to make out the words that were spoken. Her teeth gnawed her lip, and her nails seemed to be pressed into her hands, while the twitching of her wide nostrils told of the agitation that moved her so strongly.

Twice she made as though to leap up, determined not to bear longer the restraint put upon her, but only to subside again into her eager listening attitude, as Monsieur Canau still painted on, humming softly an

operatic air the while, as from time to time he stood to watch the progress of his work.

He was evidently totally ignorant of what was taking place in the shop, his occupation for the time being completely filling his mind, so that neither did he notice the agitation of Janet, which grew each moment more marked and decided in character.

At last the girl sprang sharply up, and walked towards the door, but only to be stayed by Canau.

"A moment, little one!" he said; "the Indian ink is not here. Reach it down for me from the closet."

With trembling hands, Janet crossed to the cupboard, and strove to find the cake of paint; but it was beyond her reach, and she had to take a chair before she could find it and return to the table.

"Good! Now mix me a little upon that saucer; not too much."

Janet obeyed without a word, and still Canau did not notice her agitation.

At last, though, she was free; and with eyes glittering, she made towards the door, just as she could hear now some hurried



words, uttered in a low tone, as if some one were pleading importunately.

Then a few quick broken sentences followed, and one of the cages was slightly moved from its place.

Another moment, and Janet's hand was upon the fastening of the door, and she had thrown it open in time to see Patty's drawn farther and farther over the counter in spite of her resistance, and there it was held.

There were more words—hurried, eager words—a faint cry of remonstrance, and then Patty's hand was snatched away with a violent effort, and she rushed, hot and excited, into the room.

“Aha! there, mind, my child,” said Canau; “but you will make the feathers fly. What is it? Has one of the little dogs got loose, and have you hunted him? Eh? Ah, *ma foi!* but you are hot and red-faced, and angry! Has any one dared—but what is this?”

Monsieur Canau uttered this last query in fierce tones, for, following rapidly upon the entrance of Patty, there was the dislodging

a cage or two, the rattle of some chains, and a general fluttering amongst D. Wragg's feathered possessions, as Lionel Redgrave, in full pursuit, forced his way into the little room.

## CHAPTER XI.

### LIONEL'S CHECK.

"THERE! I told you I would," cried Lionel, who had hurried round the end of the counter, but not quickly enough to arrest the fleeing girl. "You know I met Wragg"—

He stopped short upon finding himself face to face with Monsieur Canau, who, reading at a glance, from Patty's flushed and troubled face, the meaning of her retreat, started angrily to his feet, saying—

"Monsieur is in error; he makes a mistake. This room is private, and he will instantly retire."

Taken by surprise, and half abashed for the moment, Lionel shrank from the shabby little figure before him. For the Frenchman, sallow and seamed of countenance, appeared to brighten up, and his breast began to swell, as he stepped towards the intruder.

But Lionel's discomfiture did not last a

minute. Waiting until Canau was close up to him, he exclaimed—

“And pray, who the devil are you?”

“Who am I, sir?” exclaimed Canau, fiercely; “I, sir, am a gentleman, the protector of these ladies. In my country, sir—in La France—it is not money, but birth, and the habits of a gentleman, that serve to make the aristocrat. You are in error, sir; and you will directly leave this room.”

Lionel was perfectly astounded, and each moment he grew more confused, hardly knowing whether to be amused, or to think that he was in some other part of the world.

Was he dreaming? he asked himself, or was this really Decadia?

But his short reverie was made even shorter, as, quite in an agony, Janet clung to Canau's hand, whispering imploringly, as she gazed in his face—

“Oh! for my sake, pray, don't! Do not be angry.”

“Hush! hush! my little one,” said the Frenchman, softly, a most benignant aspect overspreading his poor worn countenance. “Be not afraid—it is nothing, You, sir,” he

continued, calmly turning to Lionel, "you are young, and you make mistakes. In my country satisfaction would have been asked ; but this is not La France, and I forget. But monsieur will leave at once."

In spite of himself, angry even at what he chose to call his weakness, Lionel felt that he was overmatched by his little adversary. He knew that they were standing upon different bases, and that while the one occupied by the Frenchman was solid and substantial, his own was rotten and untrustworthy. Above all, too, it would keep striking him as being startling, that there, in that low, wretched street, which he told himself he had visited for the purpose of carrying on a vulgar amour, one should start up with all the grand courtesy of a gentleman of the old *régime*, to rebuke him, and to call him to account for his flagrant breach of etiquette.

He could do no other ; and at last, stepping over the threshold, half annoyed, half puzzled, he suffered himself to be backed into the shop, and then to the door, Monsieur Canau putting on his hat as he progressed, but only to raise it with grim courtesy to the young

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man, who, frowning and humiliated, involuntarily raised his own, before walking fuming away.

"This young man, this foolish boy—do you encourage him to come here, Janet?" said Monsieur Canau, angrily, as he returned to the room to find both the young girls in tears.

Her answer was a shake of the head, while Patty came forward and placed both her little hands in his, as she thanked him for his conduct, and begged him not to speak angrily to Janet.

"It is well," he said, nodding his head many times, "and I am not angry with Janet. But this must not be : he must be stopped : he must come here no more."

He paused, for a loud sob from Janet took his attention, and turning, he found her with her face buried in her hands as she bent down, weeping bitterly.

"Poor child!" said Canau, tenderly, "she is soon alarmed. The scene has been too much ; but we will go up to our own room and have some music. It will greatly soothe and calm this troubled spirit. But no—not so; we must wait for Wragg—we must not leave

till he comes ; and Patty, my child, you must no more be in the shop alone. It is not right for you. But enough—enough of this. I will stay with you now, and we will finish the birds.”

Turning to the painting, he sketched on as if nothing had happened, conversing lightly in French, till seeing once more that the tears would flow, he raised his brows slightly, shrugged his shoulders, rolled up and lit a cigarette, and strolled into the shop, muttering, as he left the girls to each other’s sympathy—

“But this must be stopped : he must come here no more.”

Very thoughtful was Monsieur Canau, as he stood there in the shop, his gaze lighting here and there upon bird, beast, or fish. But he saw them not, for his mind was filled with the recollection of the incident of that morning, and his seamed countenance grew more full of line and pucker as he sent the blue vapour from his cigarette, eddying out upon the air in furious puffs.

Then he walked to the door to look up and down the street, considering within himself

the while what he should say to the dealer on his return ; then he wondered whether it was the little man's doing that Lionel Redgrave had gone there while Janet and her friend were in charge, and he frowned again and again as the thoughts came thick and fast. But at last, muttering to himself these words—" He must come here no more," he was about to turn into the house, when he became aware of a low surly face close to him, apparently watching his every motion.



## CHAPTER XII.

### D. WRAGG'S DAY OUT.

IF there is one thing more loved of your genuine Londoner than shell-fish, it is what he calls an "outing."

We leave it to the statistician to decide upon the number of bushels of whelks boiled and consumed, after deposition in little white saucers, and peppering with dust; the loads of mussels, the great spongy-shelled oysters, and the barrows and baskets full of periwinkles stewed in Billingsgate or Columbia coppers, sold in ha'porths, and wriggled out with pins, and then luxuriated upon—while we turn to outing. Outing—whether it be by rail, boat, 'bus, van, or the various paintless, age-dried, loose-tired, nondescript vehicles forced into requisition for the purpose.

They are not particular, these Londoners, where or how they go—the very fact of there being the fresh air, green trees, and sunshine, that they miss at home, is sufficient; and all

the dwellers upon suburban roads can attest to the air of tired satisfaction to be seen in the faces of many of those who come wearily back after that hardest of hard day's work—an outing. Tired, but happy all the same, and bearing now flowers, perhaps only lilac or hawthorn ; later on in the season, bunches of green or ripening corn—treasures to be placed in water, or suspended dry over glass or picture, to bring back for months to come the recollection of the bright day spent in the country lanes.

The four-wheeler of which D. Wragg had spoken was at the door at the time appointed, ready to take the whole party, including Patty, who had been persuaded by Janet to obtain permission to accompany them, not without some reluctance on her own part ; for after yesterday's scene she felt that she would have preferred the quiet protection of her own home. It was a very shabby, sun-blistered green vehicle, whose appearance suggested a thorough knowledge of every road out of London—the kind of carriage that, give it motive-power, would be sure to find its own way home, in spite even of an obstinate

horse. It looked as if accustomed to stop almost of its own accord at road-side public-houses, for its drawer and occupants to drink, while it rested its creaking springs and jangling iron, fetching its breath for another dusty run, as it longed for one of those wayside horseponds through which it might be driven to the easement of its thirsty joints and badly-fitted wheels, almost now disposed to moult the spokes which rattled musically in their freedom from paint.

The four-wheeler was drawn by a curved-nosed beast of an angular nature, whose character was written in his sleepy eye and bended knees, worn by contact with hard or dusty roads. His vertebræ stood up like a minor chain of Andes, extending from his mangy neck to the tableland dominating the cataract-like tail of scrubby hair. To complete his description, he was a horse of a most retiring aspect, whose presence caused dogs to sniff, and cats to run a red rag-like tongue over their white teeth and skinny lips, as they thought of the barrow, and the three small slices upon a skewer.

Mrs Winks was in a state of moist and

shiny excitement. She had already placed a fair-sized flat basket beneath the seat, and quite destroyed the appearance of her print apron, by rolling it up and folding it into fidget-suggested plaits.

But it was with no envious eyes that Mrs Winks gazed; for London, she said, was quite big enough for her, and contained all she wanted. Them as liked might go into the country for her, which she was quite sure could show no such flowers, fruits, or vegetables as Common Garding. She liked to see others enjoy themselves, though, and her face beamed with good-humour as she held a chair for Janet to stand upon and climb to her seat, when Canau led her out with as great care and courtesy as if she had been a duchess of the French court.

Patty, although the visitor, had insisted upon giving up to Janet the place of honour beside D. Wragg, who was already seated, and was making the angular horse toss its head in response to the unnecessarily jerked reins.

Then came Patty's turn to be helped into the back seat—a bright little blossom with

petals of white muslin—and Canau took his place by her side, both he and D. Wragg being perfectly stiff in the board-like white waistcoats, got up for them expressly by Mrs Winks.

That lady received divers admonitions respecting the administration of more water to the stock-in-trade; and a stern order “not to make no mistake; but if that party came about the little spannle, it warn’t the same, and he’d best call again.”

“Hooray! give’s a copper, guv’nor,” shouted a small boy, as D. Wragg now energetically jerked the reins, and cried, “P’st!” and “Go on then!” for the horse would not move, evidently considering that D. Wragg had cried “Wolf,” in his previous jerkings of the reins; but at last the brute ambled off slowly, only, though, to be checked at the end of half-a-dozen yards, for his driver to shout to Mrs Winks—

“Here, I say! them there sparrers, I won’t let ’em go at the price Pogles offered. Don’t you make no mistake: I don’t get my sparrers for nothing—p’st!”

They went on a few yards farther, but only

for D. Wragg to recall something else which made him pull up short and wave Mrs Winks forward with the whip.

"I didn't give them there bantams their mixer this mornin', and their combs is white as lather. Give 'em a few drops in their water."

"Now, do go on, there's a good soul!" cried Mrs Winks, impatiently; "just as if I couldn't mind the place as well as you!"

"I don't think as there's anything else I want to say," said D. Wragg, rubbing his nose—what there was of it—with the shaft of the whip.

"No, I shouldn't think there was," said Mrs Winks, pettishly; "so now go on."

Mrs Winks turned to re-enter the shop, but she was calculating too much, for D. Wragg did not set her at liberty until he had called and re-called her to the very end of the street, to warn her about the rats—about that there pair of fancy rabbits—and lastly, to tell her to be sure and not forget about the spanple.

"Now, don't you make no mistake about

that there dorg, for that there 's the particularist part of it all."

"There! drat the man! what does he mean dragging me away like this?" puffed the dame, fiercely; and, heedless of a shouted order sent flying after her as the four-wheeler turned the corner, she made her way back to the shop, while D. Wragg urged on his horse, working hard at his driving, so as to reach the country for a day of pleasure.

The pleasure was in anticipation, but there was a shade on the brow of both girls, as they seemed to feel the coming of what was to be to one a stroke that should make a tender heart to ache with bitter misery—to bring forth confession upon confession, and to waken both to the fact that there are dreams of the day as well as dreams of the night—dreams of our waking moments as well as dreams when the body is steeped in sleep.

But now, they were still in Decadia, with D. Wragg—no very skilful driver—urging on his horse as he applied the whip and jerked the reins, telling it "not to make no mistake, for he was behind it."

"Come on, will you?" cried D. Wragg, to increase the speed. Result: the angular horse wagged its tail.

On he went, however, stumbling slowly along, bowing his head in sympathy with a halting leg; and they proceeded through the least frequented streets, D. Wragg being influenced in his choice of them by his want of confidence in himself as a driver.

On still, past the parts where the shops began to look new, but blighted as to trade; where the houses were more thinly scattered, until they had attained to their object of being in the country, when the horse was allowed to take its own pace.

It was not a pleasant pace; for there was, when he went slowly, too much turning of the head, and dragging along of one of the hind legs; while, when apparently startled to find that he was doing but little more than keeping up with the pedestrians on either side of the road, he started off for a hundred yards in a sharper trot, it was made unmusical by the clink, clink of shoe against shoe as the poor brute overstepped itself.



But in spite of these failings, the party in the four-wheeler seemed perfectly content, for they were progressing ; suburban residences, with their pleasant green parterres and shrubberies, were gliding by them on either hand, so that there was always something new to notice ; and besides, were they not leaving behind the misery, the dirt, and squalor of the Great City ?

Learned in such matters, from his connection with the bird fancying and catching professions, D. Wragg had made up his mind to the most countrified spot he knew within easy range of London, the result being, that at mid-day the party were dining *al fresco* in the pleasantly wooded region beyond Woodford Bridge ; and then in the afternoon, Patty and Janet were wandering hand-in-hand—children once more in thought—along by sweet hedgerow and waving corn.

Now they would rest for a while upon some stile to listen to the familiar note of a bird, which seemed more joyous here, though, in a state of freedom ; now pausing to mark the busy hum of insect life ; then wandering

on again, speaking little, but revelling in the sweetness of the country—doubly dear to these prisoners of the great city.

It was their way of enjoying such trips as this ; D. Wragg, for his part, taking solitary rambles for the purpose of combining profit with pleasure—clearing his “ex’s” he called it—by hunting out suitable spots for his bird-catching clients, by the side of shady grove, or upon some pleasant common, where feathered prey might be inveigled and melted down into silver.

Canau, on his part, would take his thoughtful walks about, with his little screwed-up cigarette ; it being an understood thing that at a certain hour they were all to meet at the little inn where the horse was resting, partake of an early tea, and then face homeward.

Pleasant fields, with here and there a farmhouse or villa, with its closely-shaven lawn and trimly-kept garden full of floral beauties, but presenting no greater attraction to the two wanderers than did hedge and bank rich with darkening leaf, berry, and flower ; and on they strolled, both very

quiet and thoughtful, forgetting D. Wragg, Canau, and Babel itself, in the enjoyment of the present.

Passing slowly along—picking a harebell or scabious here, a cluster of sweet honeysuckle, or the bugloss there—Patty and Janet wandered over the roadside grass, their steps inaudible, till they reached a high hedge and evergreen plantation, which separated them from the grounds of a pleasant residence, upon whose lawn a party was assembled, apparently engaged in some out-door pastime. They were so close that the voices were easily distinguishable: the light happy laugh of maidenhood mingling with the deeper tones of male companions. Now and then, too, through the trees the light floating drapery of more than one fair girl could be made out, as it swept over the soft lawn.

At first little notice was taken by Patty and Janet; but suddenly, upon hearing a remark to which a merry laughing response was given, the former stopped short, to crimson and then turn pale, as she dropped the flowers which she had gathered.

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She stood perfectly motionless, as a laughing, girlish voice, exclaimed—

“No, no; it's Mr Clayton's turn now—he's my partner!”

“Clayton—Harry Clayton; why don't you come?” exclaimed a man's voice; “why, I declare, if he isn't proposing to Miss Rawlinson!”

Patty was pressing forward, parting the leaves with one hand, heedless of the thorns which pricked and tore her soft fingers, before she was able to obtain a passing glance of dark, study-paled Harry Clayton, rising with a smile from the feet of a young lady seated upon a garden-chair—a maiden who, at that distance, seemed to Patty to be very beautiful in her light muslin dress, and framed as it were in the soft verdure around.

Then the listeners' ears were saluted by a merry burst of laughter, drowning the expostulating tones of a man's voice; while, with bleeding hands, ay! and bleeding heart, head bent, and the tears running from her great grey eyes, Patty turned and almost staggered away, closely followed by Janet;

who, taking her arm, hurried her along, till, crossing a stile, they sat down beside the softly undulating corn.

The stillness was complete around, only broken by the cawing of a colony of rooks amongst some distant elms.

"Oh Patty, Patty, darling!" whispered Janet, taking the bended head to her breast, when, giving way to the desolation of her young heart in the fresh trouble that seemed to have come over her so suddenly, Patty wept long and bitterly, awakened as she was so rudely from a dream in which she had allowed herself to indulge.

"Oh Patty, Patty!" softly whispered Janet again, as, down upon her knees, she rocked the little head that rested against her to and fro—hushing her friend as if she had been a child, murmuring, too, as she bent over her—"And I thought so differently—so differently!"

"Let us go—let us go away from here," sobbed Patty, after vainly struggling to repress her feelings.

"Not yet—not yet," said Janet, as she played with the hair which fell upon her

breast. "There is no one to see us here, and you are not yet fit for people to look at you. You must not think me cruel if I say I am glad to see you suffer—glad your poor breast can be torn and troubled; for I thought so differently, little one, and that it was the gay handsome boy who had stolen the little heart away; for I knew—I knew—I've known that there was something wrong for weeks and weeks; and I've been angry and bitter, and hated you; for, Patty, Patty," she cried, passionately, hiding now her own swarthy face, "I feel that if he would but take me, to beat me, or to be as his dog that he fondles so—to wait upon him—to be his slave—I could be happy. You don't know—you cannot tell—the misery, the wretchedness of such a heart as mine. Do you think I am blind? Do I not know that he would laugh and jeer at me? Would he not think me mad for looking up at him?" she cried, passionately, as she struck her face—her bosom—cruelly with her long, bony fingers. "Do you think I don't know what a toad I am—how ugly and foul I must be in the eyes of men? And yet I have a woman's heart; and though

I've tried not to worship his bold insolent face, I could almost have died again and again for one—only one—of those sweet words he has flung at you so often, when I have thought you were trying to lead him on. If I could but have had one word, to have lived on it for a few moments ; even to have known directly after that it was false and delusive ! Patty, Patty, darling ! you must forgive me, because I have hated you for all this, and without reason. I have been madly jealous, and I believe that I am mad now. Oh ! hold me ! hold me ! and help me to tear out this cruel love that is breaking my heart—killing me—but you cannot understand—even you cannot tell what it is to live without hope.”

“Oh Janet !” sobbed Patty, reproachfully.

“I know, I know,” cried Janet, passionately ; “you love him and he is another's. But you are pretty ; your face is fair, and bright, and sweet ; and you will soon forget all this, and love again. But look at me—at this face—at this shape ! Oh ! why did I not die when I was little ? instead of living to become such a burden even to myself ?

They say that the crippled and deformed are vain, and blind to all their failings; but do you think that I am? Oh! no; I could loathe and trample upon myself for being what I am; while he is so brave, and straight, and handsome."

She clung, sobbing passionately the while, to Patty's breast—clinging to her with a frightened, wild aspect, as if she almost feared herself, till, by slow degrees, the laboured sobs became less painful, and the flowers which she still clutched in her poor thin fingers withered away upon their bruised stalks.

The corn waved and rustled about them; the gaudy poppies nodded and fluttered their limp petals around; and here and there some cornflower's bright purple peeped out from amidst the tangle of pinky bearbind and azure vetch. Now a lark would sing loud and high above their heads, or some finch or warbler, emboldened by the silence, would perch upon the hedge hard by, to jerk out a few notes of its song, and then flit to some further spray.

Peace seemed diffused around, and began



by degrees to pervade the troubled hearts of the two girls.

"We must go," said Janet, at last, as she dried her eyes. "I am going back to London to love my old favourites—the fish and the birds."

Then, looking up in a quiet and compassionate way at Patty, as if she alone were in trouble—

"Come, darling," she said, "let's try and forget all this ; but kiss me first, and say that you are not angry—not ashamed of me for what I have said. What makes you so silent ? Why do you not answer ?"

"I was thinking—thinking," said Patty, wearily, as she put her arms round Janet's neck and kissed her ; "I was thinking that if I could have been like you I should have been happier, for I should have been wiser and known better."

"Hush !" said Janet, softly ; "I am wise, am I not ?"

Then taking Patty's hand as they rose, in an absent, tired fashion, they walked on toward the little inn, where Monsieur Canau was awaiting them.

The sun still shone brightly, and there was the rich mellowness of the early autumn in the atmosphere, tinting all around with its soft golden haze; but it seemed to the two girls that the smoke and ashes of London had fallen upon the scene, and they longed in secret for the time of departure to arrive.

Once, though, as they sat in the pleasant little inn-parlour, Janet saw her companion start from her abstracted mood, for voices were heard approaching, and it was evident that some of the party from the lawn were about to pass the window of the room where their evening meal was spread.

Janet pressed the agitated girl's hand beneath the table, as she saw the folds of the little white muslin dress rise and fall; but the act was unseen by the others; and soon afterwards D. Wragg went away to see about the horse, while Canau lit his cigarette, and strolled outside, leaving the girls alone.

They sat together on the back-seat going home, while the horse jogged slowly along, with Monsieur Canau buried in thought, and

D. Wragg extremely quiet, save when he uttered some admonition to the animal he was driving.

Hardly a word was spoken, but heart seemed whispering to heart of the secrets that had been hidden until that day, when, as if with one impulse, they had both leaped forth into the light.

"What were you thinking about?" said Janet at last, softly, as she turned to gaze in Patty's face, so as to see that her companion was gazing up to where, clear and bright, the stars looked down upon the shadowy lanes.

"I was trying to read how it will all end—what is to be my fortune," said Patty; and she turned with a sad smile towards her questioner, and passed one plump arm round Janet's frail waist. "And you? can you read your fortune there?"

"No need—no need," said Janet, sadly. "There are no good fairies now, Patty, to touch the deformed with their wand and make them straight and bright. I know my fortune—to be looked upon with aversion to the end. But there must be no more trifling,"

she said, fiercely. "You must not come to us any more. He has been tempted into coming and spending his foolish money in the expectation of seeing you; but he must be kept away now."

They rode on in silence for some time, during which D. Wragg had his hands pretty full with the horse, which seemed to have taken a sudden desire to see whether the left-hand hedge was black-thorn or white; and baulked in his desire to investigate on that side, made a desperate effort to reach the right. This, however, was also checked, and he settled down once more into a slow jig-jog of the most somnolent nature for those who were behind.

"I am not so mad," said Janet, softly, after a while, "that I do not know what is just and right. He shall speak no more to my darling. For, in my strange, uncouth, wild way, Patty, I love you, not as I might a sister, but with something of the desire a mother must feel for her little one."

And then there was silence and sadness as the two girls sat hand-in-hand till the first straggling gaslights were visible, sitting with-

out another word till Monsieur Canau helped them to alight, and then saw Patty safely to the door of the Duplex Street house, where the end of Patty's day out was a sigh and many tears.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### JANET A LISTENER.

JANET went to her lonely room, sad and sinking of heart, to kneel upon a box by the window, gazing out above the house-tops, as if her wishes were far away in the country from which she had so lately returned.

An hour passed like this, and then from below there came the sound of voices in altercation, followed almost directly after by the noise of a struggle. Then, as she stood trembling, there were the panting, hard breathing, and half-stifled ejaculations of those who seemed to be engaged, and then utter silence.

Janet crept back to her box, for the sound of quarrel and fight was no uncommon one in Brownjohn Street, and again she knelt there thinking—thinking always, with her glittering eyes hot and aching. But now came the sounds again, and, startled and nervous, she ran to her door, which she opened, and then

stood out upon the landing, for the voices seemed to come from down-stairs, at the street-door, and one of these she recognised as that of D. Wragg, the other belonging to the heavy young man who had of late taken so much interest in the contents of the dealer's shop.

"Now, look here, Jack Screwby," Janet heard D. Wragg exclaim ; "don't you make no mistake ; trade's trade, but I ain't cut my wisdom-teeth for nothing. So look here ; if you come to my shop again, and speak to them gals as you did, and hang about here as you've hung, and talk about it like you've talked, I'll——well, there ; just you look out and you'll see."

"Wot's he allus a hangin' about for, then," growled the other voice ; "you wouldn't talk like this sort to him——no I ain't ! I ain't drunk——so now then ! P'raps I'm as good a man as he's, and got a bit o' money to go into the fancy with any time I like ; and arter the good turns I've done you, if you were anything of a man, you'd say, Come and be pardners. I've done you no end of good, D. Wragg ; and now, as I wants to be good

friends, you 're all wrong with a chap as is p'raps ekalls with them as does in dawgs."

"You *air* drunk, that's what you *air*!" exclaimed D. Wragg, indignantly, "or else you'd never come talking like that there! Pardner, indeed!" he continued, contemptuously; "there, get out!"

Then once more there came the sound of scuffling, evidently caused by D. Wragg supplementing his order with the efforts of his hands, Mr Screwby opposing with all the resistance he could bring to bear.

Before many moments had passed, it was evident that the owner of the mansion had gained the victory over his semi-intoxicated foe; for the scuffle was followed by two or three oaths, a clattering of heavy boots, and then the banging of the side-door; after which Janet stood ready to retreat, as she heard the "stump—stump" of D. Wragg's lame foot coming along the passage.

"Pardner, indeed!" muttered D. Wragg, "pardner, indeed! He—he—he—he—he!" he sniggered; and then he seemed to stand holding by the bottom of the balustrade to indulge in a few minutes' sardonic mirth.



"He's as drunk as an owl—a vagabond! Dursn't tell tales, though, if I did kick him. Let him tell, though, if he likes; who's afraid?"

Judging from the tones of his voice, though, an unbiassed listener would have been disposed to say that Mr D. Wragg was also rather far gone towards being inebriated; while, as to the fact of being afraid, if he were not in a state of fear—why did he speak so loudly?

The fact was, that after setting down his friends, D. Wragg had driven off with the rickety four-wheeler, whose problem still remained unsolved, to wit, how it had possibly contrived to hold together for another day. But held together it had, even till its return to the owner's; and D. Wragg had made his way back to Brownjohn Street to finish the day with what he called a "top-off," at one of the flaming gin-palace bars, where he had encountered Mr John Screwby, who then roused the dealer's ire by certain references, one and all of which Mr D. Wragg had classed under the comprehensive term of "cheek!"

"Shall I stop him and speak to him?"

thought Janet, as she listened to the heavy step; then, after a few moments' hesitation, "No," she said, "but I will keep watch."

That Janet intended to keep her word was evident from the fact that she hurried back to her room, where the window was still half open, and looking out cautiously to make sure who was the man with whom D. Wragg had been in dispute, there, as she had expected, was Mr John Screwby in one of his favourite attitudes—that of leaning with his back up against a lamp-post, staring heavily at the house, and, drunk or sober, full of exuberant action, which manifested itself in nods and shakes of the head and fist. His anger could be heard, too, in low and ominous growls, similar to those emitted by caged wild beasts when their keeper forces them to display their noble proportions by stirring them up with a long pole.

At last, though, Janet had the satisfaction of seeing the brute slouch away, but not without turning once more to shake his fist at the door, as he said a few words which did not reach the listener's ear, and then he was gone.

The words were loudly enough spoken, but they were drowned by the rattling wheels of a passing cart ; the utterance, though, seemed to give Mr John Screwby the greatest satisfaction, promising to his animal heart the gratification of a grudge ; for the words were—

“ I ’ll have it out o’ some on yer for this ! ”

## CHAPTER XIV.

### BROUGHT HOME.

WHISH-ISH! whoosh-oosh! over and over again, Ichabod had pumped the wind-chest full, till the handle came down heavily, and the boy had balanced himself upon it with the hard wood deeply impressing his stomach, and enjoyed the luxury of a ride down. Then he had seen the little leaden weight run up again, as the wind slowly filtered out. But though he repeated the process some half-dozen times, no stops were drawn out, no loud chords came pealing from the organ, and at last, tired out with pumping wind for nothing, Ichabod Gunniss spun the little weight about, and pulled at it until he broke the string, and saw the end disappear inside the organ-case, when he pulled out his pocket-knife, whetted it a while upon the sole of his ill-shaped shoe, and, for about the twentieth time, he began to carve that eternal "I. G." upon the back of the organ-case.

But, in spite of the whetting, the knife was blunt ; and though, by going with the grain of the wood, Ichabod had no difficulty in making a capital I ; yet, as soon as he came to the grand curves of the capital G, he found out the difficulty of his task, and after a few slips and slides, he gave the thing up in despair.

Jared was in the curtain-hung pew, but he had not been heard to move for quite half an hour. Perhaps he was composing a new voluntary, perhaps asleep ; but all was perfectly still, so Ichabod looked about for something with which to amuse himself.

Now, it will be allowed that the interior of a church is not the place where you would expect to find many objects specially adapted for passing time in any other than a religious way, particularly if that church be empty as regarded its congregation. So, for a while, the boy looked round in vain : there were no flies to catch, for the weather was growing cold ; there was not room to spin his top ; it required smooth stones and moisture to work his sucker ; pitching his worsted cap up in the air and catching it upon his

head was all very well, but it was tiring ; and though, on the whole, tolerably satisfactory, yet without appreciative spectators it was not lasting as a pastime. He could not indulge in the luxury of tying himself in knots by passing his legs over his head ; not that he was afraid of Jared coming, but on account of his being a fast growing boy, and given to filling his garments very tightly soon after they had been served out to him. In fact, at the present time, there was a good deal of wrist beyond the cuffs of his coat, and an interval between his vest and leather lower garments, which had of late fitted him so tightly, that, unknown to the world at large, Ichabod had treated them as an extra cuticle, and slept in them rather than toil for a quarter of an hour to get them off ; while, now, to have attempted anything after the fashion of an elastic brother would have had the effect of making him shed his coat like a caterpillar, always supposing that Ichabod's muscles were stronger than the charitable integument. Besides, if he got himself into such difficulties, he might be cuffed—not that Jared ever had cuffed him, but from Ichabod's experience of

human nature, he knew it to be given to cuffing, and it seemed quite possible that such a proceeding might intrude itself upon his gymnastic exercise, even from so quiet and long-suffering a person as Jared Pellet.

There seemed to be nothing of any kind to amuse the boy, though he looked with great interest at the largest pedal-pipe, and wished that he could get inside, and treat it as if it were a chimney. But it was out of his reach, so he scratched his head in despair.

"What's the good o' bringin' a cove here if he ain't a-going to play?" he muttered, rubbing his nose viciously, and then once more seizing the bellows-handle, and pumping at it until the wind-chest must have suffered from plethora, and been well-nigh to bursting, while the compressed air forced its way out again with an angry hiss. "He's asleep, that's wot he is," muttered Ichabod.

The boy then had another look round for something fresh, but there was nothing more amusing to be seen than an old dog's-eared S.P.C.K. prayer-book in half a liver-coloured cover, bearing the following legend :—

judgment dai  
wil say  
were is the book you stole awa  
from Jane Muggins  
hir book,

January 9, 1838.

—the rest being torn away, while the above was soon peeled off by the busy Ichabod, and scattered about the floor. He then, before returning the book to its place, ornamented the title-page with a fancy portrait of Mr Purkis, the beadle, that gentleman being indicated by a powerful cocked hat, which gave the sketch the appearance of a shoemaker's half-moon knife, or straight-handled cheese-cutter. Then Ichabod yawned loudly and wonderfully, displaying an elasticity of facial muscle that was surprising, while it was evident that his mental faculties were busy at work devising some new *délassement*,—the piece of string with a button at one end, which he had in his pocket, and which was generally needed for spinning and setting up one of the immortal Decadia tops. These were in Ichabod's day known to be bigger and better than any other tops in London,



could only now be plaited, crochet-chain fashion, after flicking it like a whip to make it snap, and however much of a pastime to a young lady, it proved but tame to Ichabod, who only plaited it once, and pulled it out again with a snatch, chewed the end, and wound up his top. Then he struck a Greek statue sort of attitude as he made believe to spin it, but not without bringing his knuckles sharply into contact with the organ-case, and finding their skin more easily removable than the leathern garments, into whose pockets he now replaced the top and string, as, with both hands plunged deeply, he routed in their recesses for something fresh.

He brought forth his string of buttons and polished his leaden nicker—a flat disc that had evidently been moulded in the top of a brass weight. He counted the buttons, rubbing favourite specimens upon the sleeve or his coat, and admiring the crests upon the “liverys,” and the shanked and pearl buttons. Then he stripped them nearly all off the string to give place to a metal ornament with its great G., which, after a few minutes’ hesitation, he cut off his own coat, looking guiltily

round after the deed to see that he was not observed. Then commenced the restoration or re-threading of the buttons, when the one bearing the great G looked so well in its pewter beauty, that Ichabod could not resist the temptation, but knife-armed, he carefully felt behind him, and cut the two ornaments from their abiding-place at his waist, where they had long reposed upon the back of his coat, just above the little tails ; and then his itching fingers began to clutch at those in front, which he would have cut off also but for a wholesome dread of castigation.

But the three already appropriated were a great acquisition to his string, and when, according to size, the buttons once more occupied their places, and had been admired, and polished, and breathed upon, Ichabod sighed for something new, as he replaced the collection in his pocket.

Then the boy had another good pump at the bellows-handle, riding down upon it more than once ; but there was still no demand for the air, so he had to devise some other occupation to satisfy the cravings of his restless spirit.

Those leather inexpressibles of his were almost inexhaustible in treasures, for now the lad's face lighted up as he found something fresh to suit—a dirty, sticky ball of india-rubber, which, with a little masticating, became available for the purpose of pulling out, and then after the enclosure of a small portion of air, became the base of several little bladders, which would, when compressed between the thumb-nails, explode with a sharp crack.

But even that would not last for ever, and Ichabod next brought forth a squirt, but this unfortunately was useless without water, and had to be put back after a polish upon the coat-sleeve, when he again declared it to be a shame to bring him there when he “worn’t wanted;” and feeling more than ever certain that the organist was asleep, he began to creep on tip-toe towards where he could see through the curtains, and inspect the interior of the organ-pew.

“I knowed he was,” muttered Ichabod, relieving his feelings by making a grimace at his employer—one evidently copied from a carved corbel outside the church; for, draw-

ing down his lower eyelids with his forefingers, he hooked the fourth digits in the corners of his rather too capacious mouth, and stretched eyes and lips to their greatest extent.

The face produced was striking, especially as seen in the dim light of the old church ; but Jared Pellet saw it not, though the boy altered his opinion as to the organist's somnolency upon hearing something which sounded like a sob. For, with face buried in his hands, Jared was bending down over the keys, motionless, and evidently suffering from some bitter mental pang.

Ichabod, upon hearing the sob, darted back to his place in an instant, to seize the handle and pump more wind into the once again empty wind-chest ; but hearing nothing more, he decided in his own mind that the noise he had heard was but a snore, and he stole forward to relieve his feelings with another grimace. But this time he tortured not his physiognomy ; for, making some slight noise as he peered through the curtains, he encountered the full gaze of the organist, who was looking up ; and by some strange

fascination, man and boy remained as if they were fixed by each other's eyes, for quite a minute.

"Plee, sir, didn't you call?" said Ichabod, who was the first to break the silence.

"Call—call!" echoed Jared. "No, I did not call."

"Shall I blow, plee, sir?" said the boy.

"A blow!" murmured Jared, dreamily; "yes, a heavy blow—a blast from one of the storms of life!" and he once more buried his face in his hands, while Ichabod relieved his feelings by sticking his tongue into his cheek, and lifting up and putting down one leg; before he again spoke to ask if there was anything the matter.

"Go home, boy—go home," said Jared, slowly, and speaking as if he were half-stunned.

"Shan't you want to practise, sir?" queried Ichabod.

Jared made a negative movement of the head, and, waiting for no further dismissal, the boy caught up his cap, scuttled down the stairs, clattered out of the door, and was gone, whooping and hallooing with delight at his

freedom, while the organist, slowly lifting his head, and looking about as if in a weary stupefying dream, took up a letter from the key-board, where it had lain, and where he had found it that day when he came to practise—a letter written in the vicar's bold hand, sealed with the great topaz seal that hung to his broad old-fashioned watch-ribbon, and directed to him, while it enclosed a little bright peculiarly-shaped key, which Jared remembered to have seen lying in his music-locker for weeks past, when he had come up into the loft, though, after the first time, when he had picked it up and turned it over, it had hardly taken his attention. But now, slowly and half-tottering, he rose, and left the organ-pew with the letter in one hand—an old-fashioned letter, written upon blue quarto paper, folded so as to dispense with an envelope—the key in the other, descended the stairs, crossed nave and aisle to one poor-box, where he tried the key, to find that it opened the lock with ease ; then sighing as he closed it, without noticing that the vicar had removed the contents that morning when he left the letter for the organist upon the key-board of

the instrument, Jared crossed the silent church to the other door, to try the box there, with the same result; when once more ascending to the gallery, he stood again in the organ-pew, looking towards the chancel, and then read his letter for about the sixth time.

Once only he looked up : it was afternoon, and the sun streamed in at the great west window, illumining the chancel, when there, as if lit up especially for him to read, the golden letters of that particular sentence brighter than the others—bright and flashing, but stained by the sunbeams that pierced a painted pane of a fiery hue—there were the words—

“Thou shalt not steal.”

Jared Pellet groaned as his eyes fell and rested upon the paper he held, and he began once more to read, muttering now and then a word or two or a sentence half aloud.

“No prosecution—came with a friend—wished to try the organ—found a false key amongst the music—knew wards—flashed upon him that it opened the poor-boxes—own conscience be my punishment—engagement

terminate at Christmas—best for all parties—and may God forgive me.”

“And may God forgive me,” groaned Jared aloud, after a long pause. “Forgive me for what?” and then he stood turning over and over the key he held in his hand, scanning it again and again, as if it were indeed the key to the mystery of the robbery. He wiped his forehead, and looked about him trying to think, and wondering from whence came the key. He tried to determine in his own mind the day upon which he had first seen it, but without success; though even had he been sure of the date, the knowledge, he was obliged to own, would have been valueless. It seemed but too certain that an enemy had placed the key where it had been found, though he struggled long against the thought, saying plaintively to himself, “I have no enemies.” And indeed, if his assertion were not absolutely true, he certainly had none of his own wilful making.

Then he sighed again bitterly, folded the key in the letter as he had first found it, took it out, and read the letter again, though he now knew every word by heart, and could



repeat it with his lips, but it was, as it were by rote, and the meaning seemed hard to understand. It had come upon him with such a shock, he was so utterly unprepared, that when at last more than once the truth had forced its way home, he roused himself with an effort from the prostration it caused, and tried to find some grain of comfort in the letter, which, however, afforded it not. Again he folded the key inside the missive in a dreary absent way, replaced his books in the locker, and was about to drop the cushioned lid, when he recalled where he had last seen that key, and raised a few sheets of music to make sure that it was not still there, in the farther corner where it had slipped. But no ; there was only a tuning-fork, and a little fluey dust mingled with scraps of paper. So he dropped the lid, and sat down for a few moments, with his hands to his forehead, but he raised himself again, opened the organ, then lifted the lid of the locker, took out a piece, and placed it upon the stand ready for practice ; but remembering directly after that the boy was gone, he once more closed the instrument, and looked helplessly about, till,

as if seized by some sudden impulse, he caught up his hat and hurried out of the church, forgetting to lock the door, but hastening back to do so when he had gone about a hundred yards.

## CHAPTER XV.

### PROVE IT.

A QUARTER of an hour after leaving the church, Jared was at the door of the vicar's residence, where his summons was answered by the old Lincolnshire woman who had come up to London with "Maister," and filled the posts of cook and housekeeper.

Now, most people would have told their servants to say, "Not at home," to such-and-such a person; but the vicar had his own ideas upon such matters, and the old woman was ready for the expected visitor, for she exclaimed—

"Maister said he wouldn't see you, if you called, Mr Pellet; and if you wanted to say anything, you was to write."

"But did he say"—ventured Jared.

"No; he didn't say not another word," said the old housekeeper; and Jared turned disconsolately away, walking down the street in a purposeless manner, until, moved by another

idea, he roused himself and hurried in the direction of Mr Timson's stores, where he found the head of the establishment, very stern and important, in his counting-house, but apparently ready to listen to reason.

"It's all a mistake, sir ; I'm as innocent as a child," exclaimed Jared.

"Hadn't you better shut the door first, sir?" said Timson, drily ; when Jared hurriedly closed the glass-door of communication with the warehouse. "That's better," said he. "As well not to let all the world know."

"It's all a mistake though, Mr Timson," again exclaimed Jared.

"Just so—just so, Mr Pellet, sir ; but prove it ;" and Timson thrust his fingers into his waistcoat, and then drew himself back as far as he could.

"That key has been in my locker for weeks and weeks now," said Jared. "I saw it lying there, and thought it might have been left by somebody. It never occurred to me that it would open the poor-boxes."

Mr Timson raised his eyebrows, and looked deeply into the account-book before him, and

then he placed three fingers upon the three columns—pounds, shillings, and pence—and slowly and methodically thrust them up the paper, as if calculating the amount of all three at one and the same time. He muttered, too, several indistinct words, which sounded like the names of various sums of money, before he turned again to Jared.

“I always told the vicar it was false keys, Mr Pellet; but if we’ve put the saddle upon the wrong horse, or the boot upon the wrong foot, why the wearer must kick it off, sir.”

“But you don’t think that I did it, sir?” exclaimed Jared, pitifully.

“Well, I don’t know, Mr Pellet—I don’t know,” said the churchwarden. “I don’t know, indeed, sir. I don’t want to think it’s you; but what are we to do? Mr Gray comes to me, lays his hand on my shoulder, and he says—only last night, mind, sir”—(Mr Timson had his apron on, and therefore he said “sir”)—“ ‘Timson, I’ve found out the culprit.’ ”

“ ‘Then I hope you’re satisfied, sir,’ I said.

“ ‘No,’ he said, ‘no, not at all ; I’ve found him out, but now I wish to goodness that I had not, for it seems a cruel thing.’

“ ‘Who is it, sir?’ I said.

“ ‘Oh!’ he said, ‘it’s poor Pellet. I found a false key at the bottom of his book-locker when I took the organist of St Chrysostom’s to try our instrument.’

“ ‘Pooh!’ I said, ‘nonsense, sir! stuff!’

“ ‘What!’ he says; ‘why, you suspected him yourself, and said you were sure he was the culprit only the other day.’”

“Oh Mr Timson!” groaned Jared.

“Now don’t you be in a hurry,” grumbled the churchwarden, pettishly. “Hear me out, can’t you. You young fellows always will be so rash.”

Jared raised his hands deprecatingly, and the churchwarden continued—

“ ‘Very true, sir,’ I said, ‘so I did everybody in turn; but, depend upon it, ’tain’t Pellet.’ Those were the very words that passed, Mr Pellet; and now you’ve got to prove yourself innocent, that is, if you can, sir; for, though I stuck up for you to the vicar, I must say that it looks very black against

you. We wanted to find the key to the mystery, and we found it, sir, in your box, so you've got to prove yourself an honest man, and show how the key got there."

"But I can't, Mr Timson," said Jared. "I've not the slightest notion."

"Then it looks all the blacker against you, Mr Pellet, that's all I can say—blacker than ever—Kyshow at the very least, without so much as a dust of green to relieve it."

Jared groaned.

"Why, sir, not saying it was you," continued Mr Timson, excitedly, "a man must be a terrible scoundrel to go and rob the poor, even if he was poor himself, when he was situated as you are, and knew that the vicar, or somebody else not far from you at the present time, might—I do not say would, sir—might have helped him out of a difficulty if he had been in a corner."

Standing hat in hand, Jared looked at the churchwarden, while for a moment the little glass-enclosed office seemed to swim round him; but only for a moment; then came a choking sensation in his throat, and a blank dreary hopelessness settled down upon him.

He tried to speak, but the words would not come ; he endeavoured to make up some defence, to think out some plan of action, but, blank, blank, blank—all seemed blank and hopeless, and it almost appeared to him now that he really was the thief they took him for.

“ Prove it, sir—prove it,” resumed Timson, placing his thumb upon the edge of his desk, and pressing it down as if he had Jared beneath it, and was keeping him there until he proved his innocence. “ I’m sorry, sir, very sorry, sir, and so is the vicar. Don’t you go and think, Mr Pellet,” he continued, in quite an indignant tone,—“ don’t you go and think that we wanted the poor-boxes robbed ; we didn’t, you know ; and we didn’t want to find out that it was you.”

Jared waved his hand deprecatingly.

“ Well, well, well, sir,” exclaimed Timson. “ Prove it, sir, prove it—as I said before, prove it,” and he pressed the thumb down harder and harder.

“ But, man, how can I ?” exclaimed Jared, desperately.

“ Shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo



—shoo!” ejaculated Timson. “Don’t raise your voice like that, sir, or I shall be indignant too. It won’t do, Mr Jared Pellet. You’re in the wrong, sir—you’re in the wrong.”

“I know, I know, Mr Timson,” said Jared, imploringly; “but what can I do?”

“Prove it, sir, prove it,” said Timson again. “I want to see you proved innocent; and if we are wrong, there’s my hand—leastwise, there it is when you’ve proved it;” and for fear that Jared should seize upon it, he tucked it under the tail of his coat, turned his back to the fire, and then stood looking fiercely at the dejected man before him.

But Jared had no thought of seizing the churchwarden’s hand, for as he stood there, bent and wrinkled of brow, he was going over, for the fiftieth time, the contents of the vicar’s letter, and then thinking of those at home, and the poverty that this loss of his situation must bring upon them. Then he thought of the disgrace, from which he felt that he must free his character; and in imagination he saw himself once more proud and erect in

the presence of his accusers, but refusing with scorn the prayer of the vicar that he should continue to be organist. No! that would never be; he would fulfil the duties to the last, and then, once more clear in character, he would seek for some fresh means of subsistence for the family in Duplex Street.

No organ here—no glass reflector in Timson's counting-house; but Jared was still dreaming of being cleared from the accusation, when he awoke with a start, as the churchwarden exclaimed again—

“ Prove it, sir, prove it ! ”

“ Ay! prove it; but how ? ” and desolate, despairing, and half broken-hearted, Jared Pellet left the office, seeing nothing external, but mechanically making his way into the streets, where he wandered about, hour after hour, aimless and dejected; his mind a very chaos of conflicting thoughts, save in one instance, where brightly and strong shone a ray from his clouded imagination, and that ray was before him always.

Other plans were made, broken, and confused, but this still stood out clearly before

him—come what might, they must not know of this at home—for he felt that the secret lay almost in his own breast, since a few words to Purkis and Ruggles would ensure their silence.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### A TELEGRAM.

UPON the principle that it never rains but it pours, trouble seemed just now to be rife, and Patty took upon herself more than her share. Janet used to say again and again that her friend must visit her no more, but sorrow only seemed to link them more and more together. Janet, however, was a good deal at Duplex Street, and there used to be some mournful old minor quartettes played. Patty presiding at the piano, while Jared scraped the bass out of an old violoncello, to Canau and Janet's first and second violin.

But somehow, at this time, Decadia seemed to have a fascination for Patty, and though Mrs Jared was ready to complain, she saw that her child was suffering, and did not give utterance to her thoughts.

The consequence was that Patty was more and more at the dingy house, her light

step passing, as it were, too quickly over the pollution around to take taint therefrom. There were times, though, when the incidents at the place seemed to repel her, and she would determine to stay away; but Janet's troubles, and the unvarying kindness of Canau would have been sufficient to draw her there without the yearning look in Janet's great pleading eyes when her friend had been longer away than usual. And when suspicion had fallen upon the house, let people think what they might, Patty told herself that it was her duty to cling to her friends the closer for their troubles.

Now, if in these nineteenth century busy hurrying days we were in want of a seer, we should hardly go to the ranks of the constabulary to seek him; but all the same it seemed as if police constable James Braid was right in his prophetic mind when, in allusion to various visits that he had seen paid by Lionel Redgrave to Decadia, he shook his head, and exclaimed, "You'll go there wunst too often—wunst too often, my fine fellow."

Police constable James Braid must have

been right ; for it came to pass one day that Harry Clayton was seated in his rooms with the "oak sported," a wet towel round his weary head, and his mind far away in the antique, when there was a summons at the door, and his attendant placed a telegram in his hand. He took the envelope eagerly, for to a nearly friendless man, messages, even letters, were but occasional visitants ; but his countenance rapidly assumed a pained expression, as he comprehended more fully the meaning of the abrupt words he read, and associated them with the past.

The message was as follows :—

"From Richard Redgrave, Regent Street, to Harry Clayton, Caius College, Cambridge.—Pray come to me directly : Lionel has disappeared."

For a few moments Harry stood with the paper half crushed in his hand, a flood of recollections, dammed back by hard study, now sweeping all before it, and causing him intense suffering.

"I feared as much—I might have known it would come to this," he said, bitterly ; and then he paced rapidly up and down his room, his

brow knit and the face of Patty seeming to torture him, as he tried to drive it from his mind.

Within an hour, he was at the Cambridge Station, and in due time reached Lionel's chambers in the Quadrant, to obtain the following brief information from Mr and Mrs Stiff.

That Lionel Redgrave had gone out one evening—this was the eighth day since—and had not returned. That they had waited three days, and then, feeling very uneasy, they had written down to Elton Court to Sir Richard Redgrave, who had immediately come up to town.

Sir Richard was now absent, but ten minutes later he returned, to greet Harry most warmly.

He was a tall, stern, military-looking, old man, but there was a mild, appealing look in his eye, and he seemed worn out with trouble and anxiety, for he was clinging to his last straw—to wit, the hope that Harry Clayton would remember enough of his son's haunts to give some clue to his whereabouts, and thus relieve him of his horrible suspense.

"Sit down, Sir Richard," said Harry, seeing his exhaustion.

The old man—as a rule, haughty and unbending—seemed as obedient as a child, and taking a chair, sat attentively watching the younger's thoughtful face, as he rested his forehead upon his hand.

"He went out a week yesterday?" said Harry, after a few moments.

"Yes; this day makes the eighth."

"Do you know what money he had?"

"Nothing for certain; but I sent him a cheque for fifty pounds in excess of his allowance, and at his wish, only two days before. See here!"

Sir Richard opened his tablets and showed Harry the memorandum.

"And look here," continued the anxious father; "he had taken this off—roughly too," and the speaker drew from his pocket the large old-fashioned signet-ring which the young man always wore, and which Harry well knew, from its tightness, to have been never off the young man's finger.

Harry took the ring, and turned it over in his hand to find that it had been cut through



in the thinnest part, evidently by the nippers of a bullet-mould, such as he knew to be in a pistol-case in the bedroom—a fact that he proved by opening the case, expecting that a pistol had been taken out; but though the nippers corresponded exactly with the cut, the pistol was in its place.

“He does not seem to have had any jewellery with him,” continued Sir Richard, “unless they are fresh purchases which I have not seen him wear. Watch, chains, solitaires, studs, rings, are all there, but no money.”

“Ring for the landlord,” said Harry abruptly; and, soon after, Mr Stiff entered the room, to stand mildly rubbing his hands, and smoothing a few greasy strands over the bald place on his head.

“Mr Stiff!”

“Sir to you,” said the landlord, arranging his head in his all-round collar, where it looked like a ball in a cup.

“Have you any reason to believe that Mr Redgrave had lately been in the habit of visiting either of the low districts—Decadia, for instance?”

Harry winced as he uttered these last

words, but his brow was knit, and there was an air of determination in his face that told of a set purpose.

"Well, sir, I don't see as I can say. You know what a gent he was for birds and things of that sort."

"Yes, yes, exactly," said Harry, eagerly; "and who brought them?"

"Well, you see, sir, sometimes one, and sometimes another; often it would be a little devil's imp in breeches and charity-cap, as said his name was Ikey Bod; ketched him, I did, sliding down the French-polished banisters more than once when I'd gone up with things to the drawing-room. Very often too it was that little lame man as come about the dog being lost. But there's been nothing of that sort, sir, since my good lady, sir, Mrs Stiff, made a few words about Mr Redgrave having so much live-stock—tarriers, and ferrets and such—in the house."

"That will do, Mr Stiff," said Harry, quietly.

"But if I might make so bold as to say, sir"—

"That will do for the present, Mr Stiff,"

said Harry again; and the landlord wore quite an aggrieved aspect as he turned to leave the room.

"Do you think, then, that you have a clue?" exclaimed Sir Richard, eagerly, as soon as they were alone.

"I do not know—I hope so—I fear so," said Harry, thoughtfully. "But stay a while—tell me first what steps you have taken."

Sir Richard looked disappointed, but he went on speaking.

"I directly placed myself in communication with the police, but so far they have done nothing. But I am upon thorns—what do you know?"

"Nothing for certain, Sir Richard; but let me try alone—let me see what I can do," said Harry, thoughtfully; for he was trying to arrange his plan of action, as he sought to pierce the cloud that seemed to be ahead. He knew but too well, from old associations, the character of the region which he now felt, from his own reasoning, Lionel had been in the habit of visiting, and with this thought came a sense of misery that crushed him.

He called up from the past a soft gentle

face, and rage and jealousy seemed for a while to make him half mad, till they passed away to make room for a feeling of pity, as he muttered two words, "Flight—France!" and then wiped the cold dew of perspiration from his forehead.

In a few minutes, though, he was once more himself, and sternly devoted to the object in view.

"Yes," he said, after a pause, during which Sir Richard had watched him as if life depended upon his words, "let me go first;" for he thought to spare the old man pain, and prevent more than one angry scene, if that which he surmised should prove to be true.

Sir Richard seemed too much prostrated with that which he had gone through during the past days to offer resistance to his plans, and, besides, he had great faith in the young man's foresight and discernment. So, yielding at once, he consented to stay, while, with throbbing temples, Harry Clayton turned from the house and made his way through the labyrinth of streets which led to Decadia.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### IN QUEST.

HARRY CLAYTON'S brain was very busy, for he was able to evoke from his imagination much of that which had in reality occurred. He did not give Lionel the credit of being worse than most young men of his age, but he could easily surmise that he would be sure to repeat his visits to Brownjohn Street, and now it was that he cursed his own weakness, and blamed himself as the cause of all that had happened.

"Had I acted like a man," he groaned, "I might have saved her."

Had he not had proofs from the landlord that a regular correspondence had been kept up with the shop in Decadia, and, as he argued, Patty would doubtless be often there, and feel flattered by the attentions of a baronet's son. The purchases must have been made at D. Wragg's shop, and Patty had been used as a decoy-bird.

The character of the people seemed to increase in iniquity, as he thought upon all the surroundings. Then he thought he would go to Duplex Street first, but he cast the idea aside.

"They are honest people, and doubtless I should find them broken-hearted," he mused.

It was all plain enough—thought only strengthened the conviction—the Brownjohn Street shop had been used as a trap, and Patty the bait. The prophecy uttered had come true—Lionel had gone there once too often.

But what had been the result? Had he gone away—not alone?—or was there some dark deed here to be brought to light?

His thoughts changed the next moment, and, as he hurried along, he told himself that he was, after all, perhaps only exaggerating; that this was the nineteenth century, and that now-a-days people were not inveigled and entrapped; that robbery was certainly common, and often accompanied with violence; but that murder was rare, and, when committed, was for the sake of greater gain

than could be obtained from a young man going to keep an assignation.

Harry winced as that last word occurred to him, and he strode on swiftly, as if moved by profound agitation. Then once more he slackened speed a little, his thoughts reverting to Jared and his wife. No; they would never encourage anything of the kind, he was sure. Whatever meetings had been held, must have been without their knowledge; and he had been fool enough to clear the way at the first rebuff! Or was he ashamed of the associations?—which was it?

Harry groaned as he strode on, and now began to try and cast aside his fears for Lionel's safety, telling himself once more that his imagination was clothing the affair with a tinge of romance which it did not merit.

Brownjohn Street was as of old when he last visited the region. Idleness was rife; and, as if waiting for work to fall into their hands, or, more likely, not waiting for it at all, there were stout, sturdy, soft-palmed young fellows loitering about by the score.

Some were talking, others chewing straws, and again others engaged in gambling with halfpence on secluded portions of the pavement.

One and all had a sidelong glance for the well-dressed stranger passing along, and many a nod and wink was given as heads were turned, more than one of which attracted the notice of Harry; and he shudderingly wondered what would be the consequences if he were to come here frequently—perhaps by night—to visit some particular house, lolling insolently and carelessly along, as he had seen Lionel do, with a contemptuous defiant look in reply to every scowl?

Harry shuddered again as he wondered, and then he hastened his steps involuntarily till he reached the abode of Mr D. Wragg.

Without pause, he walked boldly in, to find all apparently as when he had seen the place last—birds, animals, all were there; but there was no dove scene, and in place of the soft lineaments of Patty he encountered the swarthy face and harsh look of Janet, who was working behind the counter, her wiry little fingers rapidly continuing the work, although



her eyes were fixed eagerly upon the newcomer.

It seemed to Harry that the girl gazed angrily at him from beneath her dark brows, and set her teeth firmly together as she unflinchingly met her visitor's gaze.

A dull heavy feeling of misery now seemed to press harder than ever upon the young man's heart, as his fears in one respect seemed to meet with confirmation. The next moment, sternly and angrily, he approached Janet, holding her as it were with his eye, and, leaning over the counter, he said in a low voice—

“I want his address!”

Janet did not speak, but stared at him wondering for a few moments, and then, in a puzzled way, repeated his words—

“You want his address—you want his address!”

“Yes,” said Harry, hastily, “I want his address;” and as he looked he could see that, in spite of the bold way in which his eye was met, Janet was trembling.

Harry waited for an answer, but the only

words that came were—"You want his address!"

"Yes!" exclaimed Harry, sternly. "Where is he—where has he gone? You need not be afraid."

"Afraid,!—afraid of what?" said Janet, harshly.

"There—there! let us have none of this fencing," cried Harry, angrily—"afraid to tell me. Where is he? Has he taken her abroad? Look here! I do not want to go to her home, for they must be in trouble."

Janet burst into a mocking laugh; but Harry went on without heeding it—

"He has a father, and the old man is in despair. He fears that mischief has befallen him. We know that he is young and foolish, and that he has been here often to meet her."

"I do not understand you—what do you mean?" said Janet, coldly, though it was evident that she was greatly moved.

Harry saw it, and never for a moment relaxing his gaze, went on—

"If they have gone away together, at least let me know for certain that he is safe—that

we may expect to hear from him again soon ; and I will not press you further than for information that will prove to me the truth. I speak plainly, for this is a most painful case."

Harry paused, astonished at the change which had come over Janet, who, as the meaning of his words dawned upon her to their full extent, started back, and with one hand tore hastily at her throat, as if to check the strangling sensation that would arise. Then as she leaned towards him, as if fascinated by his eye, she gasped forth—

"Do you mean—do you mean?"—she cried, hoarsely repeating her words, as her face assumed a livid aspect.

"Yes, yes ; you know whom I mean—Mr Redgrave"—

"Mr Redgrave!" she said, hastily.

"Yes!" exclaimed Harry, "that gentleman who came here with me. He disappeared a week since. Tell me where they have gone, and you shall be rewarded."

Still her gaze was wild and fixed, and no words fell from her lips, till in his impatience, and feeling that she was playing with him,

Harry seized one of the bony wrists, when, the touch galvanising her into action, she snatched her hand away, and, as if fleeing from the memory of some past horror, tottered into the back-room; but not to escape, for she was closely followed by Harry.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### JANET'S KINDNESS.

HARRY CLAYTON stopped short upon entering D. Wragg's parlour, as if he had been smitten, for he found himself face to face with Patty, who stood before him pale and trembling, but who met his gaze with a calm look that disarmed him.

For a moment he could not speak, but stood as if petrified.

"You here!" he exclaimed. "Thank God!" and then he was silent again, struggling with the emotion that troubled him—a mingling of pleasure and doubt. "Miss Pellet—Patty!" he said at last, regardless of the bent and desolate figure crouching at her side, and he caught the young girl's hand in his—"Mr Redgrave? he has been here a good deal lately to see you."

"I believe," said Patty, coldly, as she withdrew her hand, "Mr Redgrave has been sometimes, sir, to the shop."

"But," exclaimed Harry, earnestly, "do you know where he now is? If you do, pray tell me."

"I cannot tell you—I do not know. I heard all your questions. He has not been here for quite a fortnight."

"He was here eleven—twelve day since," said a voice.

Harry turned sharply, to find himself face to face with the little Frenchman, who courteously raised his pinched old hat.

"Twelve days since!" repeated Harry, "and for what purpose?"

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed Canau, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Perhaps Monsieur will walk with me, and we will talk. Not here!"

Puzzled and anxious, Harry followed the new-comer into the shop, where he stood amidst the noise of the restless birds and animals, as if ready to answer the visitor's queries.

But not at first; it was not until after some preliminary fencing, by which the shrewd little foreigner gained a little insight into Harry's object and character, though the young man was frank and open as the day.

Canau, suspicious at first, soon saw this, and in his turn seemed to meet the visitor upon his own ground, apparently speaking openly and to the point.

"But he is young—a boy—and foolish ; he does not understand my girls—I call them 'my girls,' Monsieur. He makes mistakes ; but we forgive him. She," he said, nodding towards the inner room, "is young too, and we like to have her here—to visit Janet. Perhaps it was to see her he came. But we forgive him, and he has not been much of late."

Harry looked fixedly at the little Frenchman, as he spoke in his strange halting fashion, meeting the young man's gaze with a shifting look. Were these words of truth, or was there something hidden ? Was this man frank, or only an old deceiver, who could mask his face to suit any character when he was at war with society ? Still there was such an air of candour in all that was spoken, and so much quiet dignity in the Frenchman's words, that it was with a feeling he could not have explained that Harry thanked him for what had been said.

"But you do not seem to realise the fact,"

exclaimed Harry. "He has disappeared so suddenly, and knowing him to have been a visitor here, we naturally looked towards this place with suspicion."

"Yes, yes, but I see," said Canau, quietly ; "but he is not here. We do not know. This is a bad place round about, but we are quiet people here ; and if they—these girls, knew anything, they would tell directly. I hope he has not been robbed. There are many here at night it would not be safe to meet. But there ! he is young, he is gone upon some voyage, some travel ; be at ease : he will return, and the old man be happy."

Canau's words were so calm, that forgetting place, and the Frenchman's abject appearance, Harry seemed to recognise in him so much of the gentleman that he raised his hat, the salute being as courteously returned.

"If you can give me any information, pray do so," said Harry, "for we are ill at ease respecting him."

He added the Regent Street address to his card, and handed it to the Frenchman, who seemed to brighten up and look elate as he spoke with Harry.



"My best endeavours shall be at the service of Monsieur," he said ; and then in answer to a few more words, he gave an affirmative nod. Then together they entered the little room to find Patty bending over Janet, whose face was buried in her hands.

"I am afraid," said Harry, addressing Patty, "that I have startled her by my vehemence. I see now that I have been labouring under a gross misapprehension, and can only ask your forgiveness. Pray make my excuses to her when she grows more calm. I am very anxious about my friend."

He stopped, hesitated for a few moments, and approaching and taking Patty's hand, he said, huskily, "You say that you heard all my words, and in memory of old times, I cannot leave without saying more. I see that I was grievously in error. You must attribute it to ignorance ; but I must ask you before I go, to forgive the injustice, the wrong I have done you."

Patty did not speak ; she tried, but no words came to her lips. She looked anxious and troubled, and there was a feeling as of a great sorrow at her heart—a sorrow which

made her bosom heave till she recalled the manner in which Harry had treated her before Lionel Redgrave, and what she looked upon as his false pride. Then came, too, the scene which she had witnessed upon the Essex lawn, and the words she had heard spoken, and it seemed to her that he was mocking—insulting her.

She withdrew her hand, and just bent her head in reply, leaving Harry to quit the room with the scene photographed in his mind of Patty leaning down over the weeping girl at her side.

But could he have stayed, he would have seen Janet start up, wild and angry, to catch Canau by the arm, as she fixed upon him her wild dark eyes.

“What have they done with him?” she half shrieked. “You know—he knows. There is some foul play here, and mischief has been done for the sake of his wretched money. Oh! that I should stay here in this place, where such scenes are acted! But it shall not be; they shall be told where he is and what has been done.”

“But, my child, you are mad and wild, and

do not know what it is you say. We do not know where this foolish young aristocrat can be."

"What!" cried Janet, "has it not been shameful? Has not advantage been taken of his visits here, and he has been led on and on by Wragg, to get his money? Has it not been cruel, scandalous, abominable to her and our friends at Duplex Street? If they had known, would they have allowed her to come once? and you have not tried to stay it! But it shall all be made plain. She came here from her tender love for me, and that—that man took advantage of it, and has tried all he knew, constantly, to win her to stay in the wretched shop, so that he might sell some miserable bird. It is villainy—villainy!"

"Hush—hush, little one!" said Canau; "you talk at random—you speak wildly. Patty, my child, take her up-stairs; let her lie down and be at peace. We shall soon hear news of this unfortunate boy."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### FLICKÉRED—GONE.

"BUT you 'll sit down, Mr Ruggles," said Mrs Jared, kindly, as the little man stood with one arm resting upon the chimney-piece, heedless of the chair Patty had set for him.

"No, ma'am, not to-night," said Tim, dreamily; "I must go now—I must go. I thought I'd just drop in for a minute to see how you all were. The little ones all quite well, I hope, ma'am—all strong?"

"Thank God, yes," said Mrs Jared, softly, and the tears stood in her eyes as she spoke, and stood watching poor Tim as he leaned there brushing where the nap should have been upon his shabby hat, and then fidgeting and re-arranging the piece of glossy new black cloth which shone so conspicuously against the rusty head-piece.

For Tim Ruggles was in deep mourning, consisting of his Sunday-clothes, wrinkled and creased as his own worn face, the above-

named band, and a pair of brand-new black cloth gloves.

"We have no troubles here, thank Heaven!" said Mrs Jared, and she glanced across at her husband, who grew deeply interested directly in the day before yesterday's paper—there was no *Echo* in those days—while Patty turned away to hide her troubled face.

This was Friday, and for the whole week Tim had not done a stroke of work, but dressed himself in his best, morning after morning, and gone out,—Mrs Ruggles never knew where, but Mrs Jared guessed, and though the poor little fellow had carefully rubbed them, there were still earthy stains upon the knees of his trousers, that no amount of rubbing could remove—stains that were renewed afresh each day. And every night that week Tim had called in at Duplex Street, for he had thought nightly he would just drop in to see how they all were, and then stood gazing from child-face to child-face with a lingering eager look that was pitiful to see.

No one questioned Tim, for he had come in on the Sunday night just as Jared, Patty,

Janet, and Canau had returned from St Runwald's, where the latter had sat in the organ-loft, according to a regular custom of late, to aid his friend with the stops.

Poor Tim! he came in holding his black-banded hat before his breast, as if to shield his wounded heart, that was too sorely hurt for him to lay it before so many friends.

There was no thought there of Tim's shabby mourning, where threadbare clothes were familiar; and pitiful as was poor Tim's appearance, there was something in his hopeless look that made its way to Mrs Jared's heart; so that in spite of his expostulating, "No, ma'am, no," she would gently take him by the hand and press him back into a seat, where, with his eyes shaded, he would sit a while in silence.

There was no need for words—they all knew that at last a keener blast had put out the flickering little flame which Tim had so long and carefully screened; and respecting the blow which had fallen upon him, child after child was carefully schooled not to ask after, or press upon Tim some rough plaything for little Pine; while Mrs Jared knew that sooner

or later their humble friend would ease his loaded heart by making them the confidants of his trouble.

It was indeed a genuine sorrow that bowed down the head of Tim Ruggles; and, save to sleep, for days past he had hardly rested in the home that now seemed so desolate. It was nothing to him that his wife spoke to him almost gently—his spirit revolted against the woman; and the first morning he tore the whalebone rib angrily from the wall, thrust and stamped it into the fire, watching it with a fierce delight, as it spat and crackled and writhed like a serpent in the glowing flame; and then hurried from her presence, to return though at night, worn and subdued. He hastened off again early the next morning, where Mrs Jared rightly guessed, but no one but the gatekeeper of Kensal Green Cemetery could have told for certain.

On Saturday evening, Patty, agitated and anxious, had stolen down to Brownjohn Street, to find Janet feverish and restless, but thoughtful enough to insist upon D. Wragg seeing her friend to the better-lighted streets. She kissed Patty, though, as they

parted, saying, "It shall all be made clear yet."

Patty and Jared met upon the door-step, both too much troubled to notice each other's pained face; and soon after entering, Patty hurried to answer the faltering knock at the door which betokened the arrival of Tim Ruggles. "Just dropped in to see how they all were;" while his poor seamed face looked more haggard than ever.

"Poor little man!" whispered Mrs Jared to her husband; "what did he do that he should have such a wife?"

Not that Tim was untidy, for he was as carefully dressed as his garments would allow. Clean shaved too was Tim; but there was a desolate look in his face that sorely troubled Mrs Jared, who more than once hinted to her husband that she hoped the poor man would not do anything dreadful, and then felt almost hurt at the apparent indifference of Jared, who, hardened by his own troubles, could not bring his mind to bear upon those of others.

Jared was right, though, when he said that there was no fear, for Tim's was genuine unselfish sorrow, that in all earnestness he



had bent his back to carry—bearing himself humbly, now that the first wild paroxysms of his grief were past.

The children were in bed, and Tim, as they left the room, had kissed most tenderly and blessed each one, as it came to say “Good-night.”

“Ah! Mr Pellet, sir,” he half moaned, “you’re a rich man, sir—a rich man, sir. God has been very good to you, sir. All strong and well—all strong and well!”

Jared winced as he tried to read his paper, but could not turn his eyes from one spot—a police report of a servant who had stolen money from her employer’s box, and he made no reply.

And now Tim stood in his old attitude by the chimney-piece.

“It’s coming to-night,” whispered Mrs Jared to Patty, and she, poor girl, had run out of the room to sob for a few minutes, and then returned, red-eyed and flushed, to sit down to her work.

“I hope I haven’t troubled you very much,” said Tim, gently. “I’ve been in many times, but I’ve not been myself, you know, and

could not trust what was here to speak. It wasn't me, Mrs Pellet, ma'am," he continued, turning himself from Jared, so that it should only be a tender-hearted mother who read his quivering lips and tears; "it wasn't me, but a poor broken-down wretch, who could not be man enough to fight against his troubles. You always said I ought to have been a woman, ma'am; and you were right—quite right. But I am better now, ma'am, and I shall be at work next week. Poor people can't afford to be sorrowful, ma'am. Your rich folk can be in mourning every day, outside and inside, ma'am; we poor people can only do that once a week. I couldn't sit on the board this week for thinking, ma'am. Come sorrow, one must fight it out—come hard times the same. But one's as much as such a man as me can bear."

Mrs Jared sighed, and worked on busily at some little domestic repair done with needle and thread.

"Had you not better sit down, Mr Ruggles?" she said.

"No, ma'am," said Tim; "it is time I was gone."

Then the room was once more very still, so that Jared almost started as Tim spoke again very slowly, for his thoughts were back at the organ-loft, and the question was troubling him once more, "What shall I do?"

"Week to-morrow since we buried her, ma'am—like my own child, ma'am, and not a soul to say good-bye to her but me—no father—no mother. Ah! it was cruel, cruel! and how those whom God has given children can leave them in strange hands to pine away and die, is more than I can understand. I would not own that she was so ill, ma'am, not to a soul. I told myself it wasn't so; and all the time it was. 'Grim death won't come and take that gentle, loving-hearted girl away, Tim,' I said, 'when there's your rough worthless old carcase close at hand.' But that's what he does, ma'am; he's idle though he's busy, is death; and to save blunting that scythe of his, he goes on mowing down the sweet, gentle, bright-coloured tender flowers, and leaves the dry, harsh, old stalks like me to be snapped off by the wind.

"But I knew it was coming, ma'am, faster

and faster ; and yet I couldn't help thinking as there might be a change for the better. To have seen her, you might have hoped she was getting well, for she seemed to be easier towards the last, and for two or three days the pain was as good as gone, 'cept when her cough troubled her, and nothing wouldn't stop that a bit. Never complained neither, she didn't, but kept up dressed and about to the very last. I couldn't help knowing that she was bad ; but I didn't think it was quite so bad ; it's a sort of thing that you can't seem to believe, ma'am. It won't come home to you until it's too late, and then—then—then"——

Tim's voice grew very husky here, and, as he broke off, his hand covered his eyes once more.

"I'm very weak, ma'am," he said at last, apologetically. "It's not like most men, I know, to take on so about that child ; but, you see, my poor first wife loved her, and she seemed to be quite left to me to take care of ; and now that she's gone it don't seem to me that I did my duty by her."

Here Mrs Jared and Patty murmured strongly in dissent, and Jared cleared his

throat with a loud hem, blowing his nose, too, violently the moment after.

"I can't think that I did," said Tim, "but I did try; and if I'd interfered more when Mrs Ruggles—wonderful woman, you know, ma'am—when Mrs Ruggles corrected, I'm sadly afraid that it would have been worse when I was away. I went twice—three times—four times to Bedford Row, and told them how bad the 'child was getting, and they said they would communicate, and that was all there; for—God forgive me if I wrong any man!—I believe him as owned my poor little darling wanted to hear that she was"—

Tim broke down and sobbed like a child for a moment, but he dashed away the tears and continued—

"I wasn't satisfied with the doctor, because he shook his head and looked serious; and when I got another doctor, who smiled and chatted, and said pleasant things, I felt angry with myself because I had not gone to him sooner.

"What's the good of earning money and trying to save up a few pounds, if there is not going to be health and strength, ma'am?

But it was of no use, to any one but the doctor, ma'am, his coming ; and the poor child got to be weaker and weaker ; and though she liked to go, and I would have carried her all the way till she could have sat down on a seat in the Park, where she could have leaned her head against me, and watched the people go by, the doctor said to me she must not go out, for the days were getting too short and cold.

“ So I made her a little sofy on my board, where she could lie and see me work, and thread fresh needles for me, and hold my twist, and wax, and scissors, and hand me fresh buttons. Then too she used to like to have a few flowers ; but she would sooner go without them than me to leave her while I went to fetch them. But she used to get a good many ; for Turfey Dick, who goes round with the chickweed, used often to bring us a bunch from out of the country, and—and God bless him for it!—he never took a penny, for he said he loved little ones, and wanted to bring her a bird.

“ She did not seem to mind at all ; but she must have known what was coming, and could

not bear me out of her sight for a moment. While now it was, ma'am, that she showed what she felt towards some one else—shrinking and shutting those little soft eyes every time some one came nigh.

“ I don't believe in people's hearts breaking, ma'am,” continued Tim, picking at the band of his hat ; “ but I could have held my head down and cried bitterly any time when she was so ill, and yet so still and uncomplaining.

“ Night after night I lay down on the board so as to sleep by her, for it seemed to please the poor darling. ‘ Let me hold your hand,’ she 'd say ; and when I gave it to her, she 'd hold it tightly, and lay it on her pillow, and put her little hot cheek upon it till I took it away to get her cough medicine, and then held her up in my arms to take it. I don't make a fuss, ma'am, about what I did—it only came natural ; and I couldn't have slept and known that her little lips were hot and dry for want of drink ; while when I held her up like that, she 'd nestle close to me, and creep her little thin arms under my weskit, and ask, in her pretty gentle way, whether she might stay so, because she could sleep there.

“ And there she would sleep, only starting up now and then to look in my face, as if to see whether she was safe. Then she'd lay her head down again, and whisper to me that something kept pulling her away, and try to tell me about what she had been dreaming. But her poor little feverish head was all wrong, and her words broken and muddled like.

“ ‘Somebody's calling—somebody's calling,’ she kept on whispering to me the last day. ‘There!’ she'd say, with a start, ‘didn't you hear somebody call ‘Pine, Pine!’ and then she would call eagerly, ‘Yes, yes!’ and turn to me and whisper, ‘Was that my mamma?’

“ What could I do, ma'am?—what could I do but bend my head down over the poor darling, and not let her see the hot tears come rolling down my cheeks. It was then that I felt most how I had been cheating myself and holding myself up with false hopes, and all the time that what she said was true; for though I was holding her tightly to me—tightly as she clung, it was all of no use, for something was drawing her slowly and surely away.



"I tried more than once to smile and say something cheery to her, but she only looked strange at me, and said, 'Don't, please;' and then, soon after, she said, in a sort of dreamy way, 'Tell me what it's like, and whether I shall see my mamma there!'

"'What what's like, my pet?' I says, shivering the while to hear her talk so.

"'What heaven's like, and all about going there!'

"What could I tell her?—what could I say, a poor ignorant man like me? I felt frightened-like, ma'am, to hear her so regularly talking about something drawing her away. I know now that it was from the dreamy troubled state of her head; while she always talked so about her mamma, and never said a word about him. I taught her to say that, you know, ma'am, for I hoped some day she would have been fetched into her proper speer, to be well off; and that's why I did my best to improve her mind, and taught her catechism, and so on. And so she is well off, and better than she could ever have been here, and fetched into her proper speer, she is; for if ever there was a little angel here, it

was my poor darling. But I couldn't bear to part with her, and it was not in that way I meant."

Time after time Tim glanced wistfully from face to face, as if to see what effect his words had; and then he altered and re-arranged the mourning-band around his hat, smoothing it, brushing it with his gloves, and at last setting it upon the table.

"It seems to do me good telling you all about it, Mrs Pellet, ma'am; but for all that, the words seem to run and run; only I know that you all here used to like and take kindly to the little ill-used thing—for she was ill-used!" he exclaimed, passionately. "But anybody must have taken to and loved her; and do you know," said Tim, solemnly, "that that's why I think she was took away—because she was too good for the life below here. You don't lose no little ones, ma'am, because they are happy and well off, and well treated. Nothing comes drawing of yours away, like it did my poor pet, as I can always hear whispering to me; and when I wake of a night for a few moments, I always seem to feel her little hot hand nestling in my breast,

and feeling after mine to put under her burning cheek.”

Mrs Jared shivered, and looked as if about to run up-stairs and see whether her own little ones were all safe.

“But she was wanted,” said Tim, sadly, “and I shall never forgive myself—never, never!” and sinking back in the chair behind him, Tim Ruggles gave free vent to his sorrow, bowing his head almost to his knees, covering his face with his hands to conceal its working and the tears. His sobs seemed to tear their way from his breast, as, heedless now of all but his overwhelming grief, he rocked himself to and fro in the bitterness of his anguish.

For some time nothing was heard but sobs in that common room. Mrs Jared and Patty crept closer together to weep in unison, Mrs Jared making it appear—though a piece of base dissimulation—that she was only comforting Patty; while Jared rose to rest a hand upon his visitor’s shoulder, telling himself that his was not the only trouble in the world.

Tim wept on passionately, for the grief

which had been thrust down and dammed back for days past, now burst forth with a violence that could not be stayed, as, still blaming himself for his weakness and lapse of duty towards the child, he groaned in the anguish of his spirit.

“I shall never forgive myself,” cried Tim at last, leaping from his chair, “never! I lay down beside her for a bit that night, with her cheek upon my hand, and dropped off; but she moaned in her sleep, and it woke me directly. I gave her some drink, when, ‘Please take me,’ she whispered, and her little voice sounded, oh! so cracked, and harsh, and strange. So I took her in my arms—so light she was!—and then, having been watching night after night, I felt drowsy again. I propped myself with my back to the wall in the corner of the board, with that little hand nestled, as it had been scores of times, close against my breast. Her little arms were round me, and then I rocked her to and fro gently till she began to moan again quite softly, as she had often done of late in her sleep; and then, instead of keeping awake, I dropped off again, and slept for

hours, till the light came peeping in through the sides of the blinds.

"Pale and cold and scaring looked the light that morning; and as I woke, cramped, tired, and stiff, a horrible thought flashed through me, tearing me so that for a long time I dared not move nor look down. I seemed to have known all that had taken place, and to have felt it all, just as if I had been awake all night. I didn't dream it, you know, ma'am, so I can't explain myself; but I knew well enough that while I had slept, the something that had been drawing the poor darling away for so long had come at last and borne her off.

"I knew it all well enough in an instant of time—that what I held so tightly in my arms as I sat there was not little Pine, but only her shape, and fast growing colder, colder, and colder—oh! so fast. And yet I could not move.

"There was no moaning now—no sigh—no rattling in her poor little chest—no twitching restless moving of her poor little hands—no starting wildly from a half sleep to kiss me—but one terrible stillness; and I'd have

given all I had only to have heard once more the dreadful painful cough that was gone now for ever.

"I shall never forgive myself," cried Tim, with a fresh burst of emotion. "Only to think of it!—only to think that I could not keep awake to watch over her to the last!" and Tim buried his face once more in his hands.

Poor weary watcher that he was! he could not see the loving hand that had pressed down his burning eyelids, but accused himself angrily—the watcher alone through weary night after weary night—the watcher who had fought with all-conquering sleep till it could be resisted no more, and he was spared the sight of the last faint struggle!

"Yes," said Tim, after a pause, "a week to-morrow since we buried her, ma'am, and I'm going to begin work again on Monday. You said that I ought to have been a woman, ma'am; so you won't be so very hard upon me for what you have seen to-night. I'm better now, for that was there and wanting to come; and," he said, piteously, "you're the only friends I have in the world, and I wanted

to tell you all my trouble, but couldn't before to-night."

No sooner had Tim left the house with Jared—heartsore himself, and glad of such companionship—to walk part of the way home with him, than Mrs Jared rushed up-stairs to kiss and cry over every one of her numerous progeny, as she satisfied herself that they were all safe. And sadly were the poor children disturbed by the process, for the light was cast upon their eyes, and Patty was consulted as to whether this one did not look pale, and that one flushed, which last was undoubtedly the case, for it had to be fished from beneath the bed-clothes, its unintelligibly mumbled words being taken for threatenings of delirium and fever.

Mrs Jared descended at last, and Jared vowed that she got up six times that night to go into the various bedrooms—and she herself owned to three—while Jared lay telling himself he ought to make a confidant of his wife, and tell her all ; but he shrank from the task, as he said, " Poor thing ! no ; she has enough to bear as it is."

It was true, for Mrs Jared's trials were any-

thing but light, and she hid many a tear in her turn from Jared. But for all that, that night, after hours had passed, she had another to spare, as she thought of the dead child, and felt for it more than ever a strange yearning; while the tear that made wet her cheek was as much for it as for the sorrows of poor Tim Ruggles.

Tears—tears! there were many shed that night; for in her own little room Patty too lay sleepless, thinking of Janet and her trouble—of the missing man, and of poor Pine as well; but somehow, in spite of her sadness, her thoughts would veer round to him who had first made her heart to beat, and that was Harry Clayton.



## CHAPTER XX.

### A BROKEN REED.

HARRY Clayton walked hastily back towards Lionel's chambers, his mind confused by what he had seen and heard. He was half pained, half pleased ; at one moment he felt elate, and his heart swelled joyfully. He stopped once ; should he go to Duplex Street ? Then he would think of conflicting circumstances, and depression would ensue. Thoughts that he had believed to be crushed out were again asserting themselves ; and so pre-occupied was he, that he did not see the peering curious face of D. Wragg, as it passed within a yard of his own, watchful as that of a terrier after a rat.

So conflicting were Harry Clayton's thoughts, that for a while, though not driven out, the recollection of the mission upon which he was sent was certainly dimmed. He had been so surprised—matters had turned out so differently to what he had anticipated ; and he was so pleased to find that he had

been in the wrong that for a time he strode on pondering upon the pleasant vision he had left behind, till, rapidly approaching Regent Street, the thoughts of the missing man came back with full force, and with them a feeling of sorrow and remorse for what he was ready now to call his forgetfulness.

Rousing himself then to a sense of duty, he hurried up the stairs, but not so quickly that he had not time to think that there was not the slightest necessity for the people at D. Wragg's to be put to further trouble or annoyance. If ill had befallen Lionel on his way to or from Decadia, they were not to blame; and it was his duty, he told himself, to protect them. And after all, it seemed, as matters would turn out, that Lionel had been in some other direction.

But suppose, suspicion whispered, he had been too ready, after all, to trust to appearances; that the dark deformed girl was frightened because she knew that he was in search of his friend, and the old Frenchman was, after all, only an oily-tongued deceiver; while Patty——

There was a warm flush in his face as he

strode up the few remaining stairs to the room where Sir Richard Redgrave was seated, ready to start up as the young man entered.

"Well," exclaimed the elder, "what news?"

"None, sir—at present," responded Clayton, gloomily. "I was leaning upon a reed, and I found that it was broken."

Two days after, the following advertisement appeared in the second column of the *Times*:—

"Two Hundred Pounds Reward.—Disappeared from his Chambers, 660 Regent Street, on the 6th instant, Lionel George Francis Redgrave, aged 24; 5 feet 11 inches high; muscular, fair open countenance, slight moustache, and the scar of a hunting-fall over the left temple; aquiline nose, light-blue eyes, and closely-curling fair brown hair. Supposed to have worn a black evening-dress suit, with light-grey Warwick overcoat. Whoever will give such information as shall lead to his discovery, shall receive the above reward.

"660 Regent Street."

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"That will bring us some news, I hope, Clayton," said Sir Richard. "If it does not at the end of a week, I shall increase it to five hundred, and at the end of another week, I shall double it. Money must find him if he is to be found. But we will find him," he exclaimed, fiercely, "dead or alive—alive or dead," he repeated, with quivering lips. "With all his light carelessness, he never let a whole week pass without writing to me, and something fearful must have happened, I feel sure."

"Be hopeful, sir, pray," said Clayton, as he gazed in the worn and haggard countenance of the stately old gentleman.

"I will, Clayton—I will, as long as I can; but this is hard work; and if he is dead, it will break my heart. You ought never to have left him," he added, reproachfully.

"I would not have done so," said Clayton, "had I possessed the slightest influence; but during the latter part of my stay I found that he would not submit to the slightest restraint."

"Yes, yes!" said Sir Richard; "I know

how obstinate the poor boy was," said the old man, in tremulous tones.

"*Is*, sir—*is*," exclaimed Clayton, laying his hand upon Sir Richard's arm.

"Yes, *is*—we will not yet despair," said Sir Richard; "but you had influence—the influence of your quiet, firm example. But did I tell you that I have had reward-bills posted about the streets?" he added hastily, upon seeing Harry's pained and troubled aspect.

"You did not, sir; but it was wisely done. And now it seems to me necessary that one of us should be always here in case of information of any kind arriving."

"I will stay," said Sir Richard; "it is my duty, though the inaction is extremely hard to bear; but I am weak and troubled, and unable to get about."

"You may be the first to get good news," said Harry, smiling.

"Perhaps so—perhaps so," was the reply. "I never knew before how old I had grown. You must carry on the search; but you will come back often, Clayton?"

"I will, sir," said Harry, gently, and soon after he left the house.

Harry's first visit was to Great Scotland Yard, where he was passed up-stairs to a quiet ordinary-looking person, in plain clothes, who, however, only shook his head.

"Nothing at present, sir," he said; "but do you know, sir, I think Sir Richard Redgrave is making a mistake, sir—'too many cooks spoil the broth!' Better have left the matter entirely to us; we're doing all we can. Private inquiries are all very well; and Mr Whittrick's a good man—was here, you know; but he's only good for a runaway-match or a slope, or anything of that kind. Sir Richard's wrong, sir, depend upon it he is."

"You must excuse it all on account of the old gentleman's anxiety," said Harry, quietly, as, after being told for the twentieth time that information should be forwarded the moment it arrived, he took his leave, so as to seek the renowned Mr Whittrick, of private-inquiry fame; but here the interview was very similar to the last; and he returned to Sir Richard to find him restlessly pacing the room with a telegram in his hand.

"News?" exclaimed Harry, excitedly.

"For you," said the old man, kindly; "and I hope it is good."

He handed the telegram, which had been sent down to Cambridge, and re-transmitted. It was short and painful. Richard Pellet was the sender, and he announced the sudden and serious illness of Mrs Richard at Norwood—Harry arriving at his mother's bedside, but just in time to receive her farewell.

This was a check to future proceedings, for Harry was deeply affected at the loss. He could not recall the weak woman who had been flattered into marriage without proper settlements by Richard Pellet, but only the tender loving mother, who had always been ready to indulge his every whim; and till after the funeral he was too much unhinged to do more than quietly talk with Sir Richard, who had, on his part, little news to give, save the usual disappointments that follow upon the offering of a reward.

The last sad duties performed to the dead, Harry gladly returned to the task left incomplete, seeing in it relief from his oppressive thoughts, and an opportunity of serving one whom he looked upon as a benefactor.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### AT AUSTIN FRIARS.

"WHAT name?" asked a clerk.

"Pellet—Jared Pellet," said the owner of that name.

"Pellet,"—repeated the clerk, hesitatingly ; "I'm afraid he's engaged;" and he looked hard at the shabby visitor to Austin Friars, as much as to say, "You're a poor relation, or I'm no judge."

"Tell him his brother would be glad of a few minutes' conversation," said Jared, desperately; and he stood gazing over his brother's offices, where, over their gas-lit desks, some half-score clerks were busy writing.

It was a bitter day, with a dense yellow fog choking the streets, so that eleven o'clock A.M. might have been eleven o'clock P.M., save for the business going on around. The smoke-burdened vapour had even made its way with Jared into the offices; but the



glowing fire in the polished stove was too much for it, and the fog soon shrank away, leaving Jared shivering alone, as much from a strange new-born feeling as from cold, as he was gazed at from time to time by some inquisitive eye.

"This way, sir, if you please," said the clerk, and the next minute Jared was standing like a prisoner at the bar before his justice-like brother in a private room—standing, for Richard did not offer him a chair.

"I have come to you for advice," said Jared, plunging at once into the object of his visit.

"If you had come sooner to me for advice, you would not have been in this plight," said Richard, coldly, as he glanced at his brother's shabby garments, and the worn hat he held in his hand. "But what is it?"

Jared stared, for, to the best of his belief, his brother had never given him any advice worth taking.

"Time is money to business people," said Richard, for Jared remained silent.

"Yes, yes, I know—I know," he said; and then he paused again, as if nerving himself

for his task, till once more Richard turned hastily in his chair, and was about to speak.

"Bear with me for a few minutes, Dick, and I will tell you all," exclaimed Jared. "I am in bitter affliction."

"I suppose so," said Richard, "or you would not have come. There! speak out; how much do you want?"

"What! money?" replied Jared; "none. But don't be hard upon me, Dick—the world can do that."

"The world is to any man his lord or his servant—a hard master or a cringing slave, whichever a man pleases," sneered Richard. "Let him keep poor, and the world is his ruler; let him get rich, and the world will be ruled."

"But I am in trouble—in great trouble," cried Jared, pleadingly. "The poor-boxes at our church have been robbed."

"Well!"

"Great endeavours have been made to discover the thief."

"Well!"

"And by some means a key got into the locker of my organ-loft."

"Yes!"

"And it was found by the vicar, who cruelly wrongs me with his suspicions."

"Yes!"

"And I am accused, and dismissed from my post."

"Well!"

"What shall I do? Help me with your advice. How am I to prove my innocence? What is best for me to do under the circumstances? I feel my head confused, and am at a loss how to proceed, for I cannot let it be known at home. The vicar seems to be so convinced of my guilt that he refuses to see me, and returns my letters. All I get from the churchwarden when I assert my innocence is, 'Prove it, sir, prove it.' I have thought by day and by night. I have struggled hard—I have done all that a man can do, but I am as far off as ever. I was not born, Dick, with your business head—I'm not clever. You know that I never was, and now I have turned to you"——

"To mix myself up in the affair?" said Richard, coldly.

"No, no; to advise me—to tell me what I should do," said Jared.

"Who committed the theft?" said Richard, scowling.

"Indeed, indeed, I have not an idea," replied Jared, humbly.

"No, of course not. Well, I can tell you, Some of your fine Decadia friends—that wretched fiddler, perhaps, that you disgraced yourself, your family, and *me*, by making a companion. And now you want me to get my name sullied, and the substantiality of my house shaken, and my credit disgraced, by being drawn into connection with a beggarly, low, contemptible piece of petty larceny? Do you think I am mad?"

"Oh, no, Richard."

"Hold your tongue. I've heard you—now hear me. Do you think I have gone backwards into an idiot? Do I look childish, or in my dotage? But there—some people are such fools!"

To do Richard Pellet justice, he looked neither mad, idiotic, nor childish, but the image of an angry sarcastic prosperous man, as he threw himself back in his morocco-

covered chair, and, stretching out his glossy legs towards the fire, scowled at his brother.

"O Richard!" groaned Jared, in despair.

"Look here, sir," said the city man, in a deep voice—angry, but not such a one as could reach the clerks—"look here! We were born brothers, I suppose; we bear the same name—curse it since it is yours too. You have taken your path in life, and I have taken mine, and they are paths that grow daily more and more apart, never to join again. I have never meddled with you, nor asked your help. I have never troubled you in any way; while you—you—what have you ever been but a disgrace—a clog—a drawback to me in my every project to raise our name from the dust? I forget all this, and, to be brotherly try to heal all old sores. I ask you and your family to my house, and what do you do? You disgrace it not only by your appearance, but also by your behaviour, making my very servants to laugh in their sleeves; and as if that were not enough, your well-trained trull of a child must begin to set her snares and traps, acting with less modesty and decorum than the veriest creature of our

streets, until she has by her artful tactics disturbed the peace of a happy family, driven a foolish boy from his home, and his sorrowing mother to a premature grave."

At this point Richard seemed to consider that it would be effective to display a little emotion instead of anger ; but he soon merged again into the upbraiding.

Jared started at the news, for he had not heard of his sister-in-law's decease, but he had noticed a deep band round his brother's hat—and noticed even the very stitches, as he stood there smarting and indignant. For a few moments the news of the death checked him, but his indignation began to assert itself, and he was about to reply. Richard waved him to be silent, and continued—

"And now—what now? You come to me with a lame pitiful tale, that I may employ counsel for you, have my name dragged into the public courts and papers to be the talk of the whole city—to be more disgraced by you than ever I have been before. I don't know you. I hold no communication with you. You bear my name, but I renounce all relationship. I will not be dragged into the

matter. It is no business of mine. Go and ask your French friend from Decadia, or the lame bird-fancier. You see I know your companions and associates, great musician as you are. You always were a fool, and now you have taken the step which lay between folly and roguedom. Leave my place at once and quietly. Dare so much as to speak an abusive or reviling word in the outer office, and I'll have you given into custody for trying to extort money; and then, with your present character of thief, and the poor-box money behind, how will you stand?"

Richard Pellet, like many more bad men, was gifted with a tongue which, given an inch, took an ell, and said more than ever its owner had power or will to perform. It backed verbal bills that its master would never be able to take up; and now he had risen and stood glaring at his visitor, with his hand resting upon the heavy chair he had placed between them. For, as he stood completely dumbfounded before his brother, Jared had involuntarily taken up a ruler from the desk; but not to strike, he only handled and tapped it with his long pliant fingers. He could

not speak ; indignation and sorrow choked him ; and he stood there panting, crushing down anger, bitterness, the whole host of emotions that rose.

Was this his brother—nursed at the same breast—the last of all men who should have turned against him—apparently snatching at the chance of erecting a greater barrier between them—a barrier that should last till the grave separated the living from the dead ? This his brother, who most likely, by his business shrewdness and advice, could have cleared the way towards freeing him from his difficulty, employed some keen investigator in his behalf, and had the matter sifted to the bottom ? The remarks directed against the man whom, for his musical talent, he had made his friend, also stung him, but not as did the insults hurled against poor Patty.

A groan almost burst from Jared's breast, but he smothered it as it rose. He would go on his path, let it lead where it would, and trouble his brother no more. He would bear his disgrace how he could—for how dared he, a poverty-stricken beggar, conscious though he might be of his innocence—how dared he



appeal to the law to clear him? Had not the innocent been transported before now—suffered even unto death upon the gallows? while, if they had not felt sure of their array of evidence, would the vicar and churchwarden ever have accused him? What could he bring up by way of defence? Nothing but his bare word. He confessed to himself that the matter looked black against him. Perhaps his character for integrity ought to have borne him up in their estimation; but then, as he told himself bitterly, he was poor; and where money was concerned, the poor were always held to be liable to fall into temptation. The vicar had been merciful, and would not prosecute; should he then carry the matter before the face of justice, and have it investigated? He might be cleared, but he might fail; and then, as he would have forced the matter upon the vicar, and called in the aid of the law, what would be the consequences if the case went against him? He dared not think; but stood before his brother gazing vacantly about, till Richard spoke again—

“ I would have helped you, and done any-

thing, if you had acted like a brother ; or had it been anything where you had not been dishonest."

"Sir, I have not been," exclaimed Jared, almost fiercely.

"Then prove it," cried Richard ; "but now—there—there—there!" thrusting one hand into his breast, "you had better go."

"I am going, Richard," said Jared, meekly, as he gazed round at the luxurious office—at everything, in fact, but his brother—till the sharp "ting—ting" of a table-gong aroused him. "God forgive you, Dick!" he murmured ; "we may never meet again."

"Show this person out," said Richard, harshly, as the clerk appeared ; and then, throwing himself back in his chair, he made a violent rustle as he took up the *Times*.

This was the last cruel stab—one that brought forth a mild reproachful, even sorrowful look, from Jared—a look that made Richard wince more than would the most bitter scowl. Then the broken man walked slowly, and with bent head, till his hand could be laid upon the door-post, when turning to look upon his prosperous brother for the last time

in his life, he took in the sleek portly form, the heavy insolent countenance; and then, in spite of the clerk's impatient, "This way, sir!" he said, in a low clear voice—

"God above, who knows my innocence, forgive you, Dick, even as I do!"

The heavy door closed, and crossing the office, Jared stood once more in the fog—mental and real—till, crossing the road, he turned for Duplex Street; while, though glad at heart to have rid himself of so troublesome an incubus as a poor relative accused of theft, there was a strange chill fell upon Richard Pellet. It might only have been the dread of another visitor whom he might receive, but he blamed the fog and denounced it heartily, but without effect, for it still hung gloomily over Austin Friars.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### FRIENDS ON FAILINGS.

"I 'm getting soft and stupid and blue-moulded," said Mr Timson, as he stood warming himself with his hands under his coat, and twitching them tail-fashion before the fire ; "but I 've got it this time, and no mistake."

"Got what?" said the vicar, as he sat looking at the golden caverns amongst the coals.

"Got what! Why, the right man—down upon him regularly."

"Do not, pray, say any more, Timson?" said the vicar, sadly.

"But I will," said Timson ; "and how it was that we never thought of him before's a wonder to me. 'Tain't Pellet, but that little French fiddler that's so often with him. My word, sir, if ever there was 'thief' written in any man's countenance, it's there. What business has he in our church? Why, the scoundrel is a follower of the scarlet woman,

and sits on seven hills when he's at home, I'll be bound; and that's why he chose Decadia to live in."

"Tut, tut, tut!" ejaculated the vicar.

"I don't care; it's a fact," said Timson. "That fellow would light the fires in Smithfield again, as soon as look at you; he ought never to have been admitted into our church. Why, sir, he's one of those scoundrels who would think it a meritorious act to rob our poor-boxes, and go and get absolution for it directly."

"O Timson—Timson—Timson!" sighed the vicar; "thou art sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal."

"You're another!" puffed Timson, angrily. "What do you mean?"

"Where is your charity, my friend? where is your charity?"

"Stolen out of the poor-box!" cried Timson, in a huff; "that's where. And you mark my words if they don't come true, and you'll find it out one of these days in Smithfield."

"Psh!" ejaculated the vicar, as near to angrily as he could get, and then there was silence till the effervescence had subsided.

"I don't like it—I don't like it," said Timson, after a pause. "There! I hate it. You may look, sir; but I've had that Pellet with me this afternoon, and I can't stand those sort of meetings. Why wasn't it some one else, and not that poor sensitive struggling fellow? I'm sure it was the French Papist. Why didn't we discharge old Purkis, or Mrs Ruggles, or the clerk? It was pitiful to see that poor fellow—pitiful! Why didn't you suspect and find out the Frenchman? I should like to see him in custody."

"Don't talk nonsense, Timson," said the vicar. "But it's a bad job!" and the old gentleman sighed.

"Bad job! Ah! I should think it is a bad job," said the churchwarden. "Now, what would it take to square the matter?"

"Square!"

"Yes! make up for what has been stolen."

"Nothing!" said the vicar, indignantly—"no amount. The sin is there, and we cannot remove it."

"'Spose not!" said Timson; "but if twenty or thirty pounds put in the poor-box on the sly would make you feel all right again,

and let poor old Pellet off with a good bullying, upon my soul I should feel half disposed to find the money."

"Don't be irreverent, Timson; a man's words are never strengthened by an oath. I detest swearing."

"Swearing! That's not swearing," said Timson; "that's only being emphatic."

"Then don't be emphatic, Timson, but speak plainly, like a man."

"Humph!" ejaculated the churchwarden; and then followed a long period devoted to smoking.

"Only think of a man of his talent being a thief!" said the vicar, at last.

"What! the Papist?" exclaimed Timson; "why, you could see"——

"No—no—no—no!" said the vicar, testily; "you know whom I mean. He came here; but I would not see him—Pellet, you know."

"Why not?" said Timson, bluntly.

"Because I'm weak, my friend—weak, and might be tempted to give way, when I know it would not be right."

"Well, 'tis hard—'tis hard," said Timson; "I was ready to give way myself; and I

don't know now but what I believe the poor fellow is telling the truth."

"What did he say, Timson?" said the vicar, "for I won't see him. I would not believe in his guilt till it was forced upon me; but now I am fixed."

"What did he say! Why, that it's all a mistake."

"I wish it were—I wish it were," said the vicar, who seemed truly grieved; "but let him prove it—let him prove it."

"Just so, I quite agree with you," said Timson. "The very words I said to him. 'Prove it, Pellet,' I said—'prove it, and there's my hand;' and I thought then that he was going to snatch it, so I put it out of his reach."

"Such a musician!" said the vicar, "and to think of his proving a thief!"

"Just like 'em," said Timson. "Those musicians are all thieves. They steal one another's work, and call it inspiration. But don't you think we might put it a little milder? 'Thief' is an ugly word; and—er—er—er"——

"Well?" said the vicar.

"What do you say to embezzlement? Embezzled the moneys of the poor."



"Embezzlement!" exclaimed the vicar, indignantly; "why, sir, it's sacrilege—an abomination!"

"But you know it might turn out to be a mistake after all, and it would be better to have charged a man with embezzling than being a thief."

"Ah! Timson, I wish I could think so—I do indeed; but it can't be a mistake. You had your own suspicions of him."

"Well, yes," said Timson, drily; "but I hadn't then thought of the Papist. That's the man, sir. Leadenhall Street to a China orange on it."

"But you remember how confused he was in the church that day."

"What! the Papist fiddler?"

"No, no—Pellet. I couldn't help thinking something of it then. And, besides, look at the long hours he has been in the habit of spending in the church alone. I've known him to be there for hours, and not a sound escape from the organ—no boy there, in fact."

"Ah!" said Timson, "I'd give five shillings or a pound of my best green for leave to give that boy a good sound quilting."

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"It all points to the fact that he has yielded to temptation when hampered by poverty," said the vicar, without noticing the interruption.

"Well," said Mr Timson, "it's a bad job; but I'm glad that you don't mean to prosecute."

"You think with me then, Timson?"

"Of course—yes. Do you want to put the father of about a score of children on the treadmill? Why, they run about his house like rabbits; and if you do that, you'll have them come and shriek in your ears for bread."

"God forbid! I will hold to your way of thinking. I should never have done for a magistrate, Timson. They wanted me on the bench when I was down in the country; but I backed out; for I knew I should be too easy. No, Timson; I would not deprive the poor fellow of a chance of making an honest living in the future; for, you see, he is a man who has yielded once to temptation, and will repent to the end of his life. No, sir, I would not mar his future, for the world. I'm not one of those men who prosecute upon what

they call principle. Perhaps I am wrong, but I am not unmerciful. I believe him to be a good man at heart; and I think, when he leaves, Timson, if we were to put say ten pounds a-piece, and send to him anonymously, it would be giving him a fresh start in life, eh? What do you say?"

"Good thing to do," said Timson, "but better let him have it in tea. Say an annuity of so many pounds of tea per annum—mixed—for so many years."

"Oh, no, Timson; it must be the money. The poor fellow was oppressed by poverty when he—er—er—took the money."

"Then why didn't he come like a man and ask me to advance him a few pounds, or let them have so much tea on credit?"

"The wrong sort of man, Timson—the wrong sort of man! But I'm sorry for him, very."

"So am I—so will everybody be," said Timson, gruffly; and then they had another long smoke.

"You won't tell him at the very last that he may stop on, I 'spose?" said Timson,—"let him think, like, that he's going to

be hanged, and then at the last moment send him a reprieve? My wig, sir, what a voluntary we should have the next Sunday!"

"No, Timson, no. Duty is duty, and I should not be doing mine if I looked over so flagrant an offence."

"But you won't alter your mind?—you won't prosecute?"

"No, sir, no," said the vicar. "In spite of all, I respect the man and the way in which he has brought up his family. I am sorry, deeply sorry, for Mr Pellet and his wife and daughter; and really, sir, I'd give a heavy sum to have proved him innocent—I would, indeed;" and to give emphasis to his assertion, the old gentleman brought his fist down heavily upon the table.

"Mind the glasses!" said the churchwarden, in a warning voice, and he pushed them a little farther from his friend.

"It's very sad, and with such a family, too!" said the vicar. "How many has he?"

"Scores!" said the churchwarden.

"Don't be absurd, Timson—don't be a fool," said the vicar; "this is no laughing

matter. Suppose that you were in the poor man's position?"

"Shoo—shoo—shoo—shoo!" exclaimed Mr Timson. "What do you mean? who is absurd—who is a fool? I'm not one, am I? And what's the good of supposing me the thief? Absurd, indeed!"

"I only said don't be absurd, don't be a fool, Timson," said the vicar.

"I believe that's prevaricating," said Mr Timson. "I consider 'fool' a strange title to call an old friend, Mr Gray."

"Sit still, Timson, and shake hands, and don't be an ass," said the old gentleman, warmly; and as he spoke he held out his hand, with the accompaniment of a look that wiped away the epithet that had escaped inadvertently during his excitement; for the churchwarden shook the hand as warmly as it was offered.

"But," said Timson, just to show that it still rankled a little, "it seems too bad to pity the poor man now, when a little assistance would have kept him from what *you* say he has done."

"What *we* say he has done," replied the

vicar ; "for look at the proofs. Have I not my duty to perform as well as any other man ?"

"But it does seem a very hard case," said Timson, "and I should let him off. I've none of your fine susceptibilities ; they don't seem to go with tea-dealing."

"Won't do, Timson—won't do," said the vicar. "I'm a very homespun man, and have forgotten the greater part of my college polish. Half a life in rough Lincolnshire does not improve one ; but I can't think as you do. I would that I could go to the poor fellow and say, 'Mr Pellet, it's a mistake—forgive me.'"

"I should like to go with you," said Timson.

"But not a word to any one else," said the vicar ; "we won't have the finger of scorn pointed at him. Let him stay till his time's expired, and then go where he will, and begin life afresh, with what we send."

Timson nodded.

"If it becomes known, let the onus rest on himself. It shall not come from us. And besides, if we put it about, people would blame us for letting him stay out his time.

I don't want to do him a mortal injury. Let him see the evil of his ways, and do better in future. Let him, as I said in my letter, seek forgiveness from Him whom he has sinned against!"

"Amen!" said Timson, solemnly; and then the two friends sat on far into the night smoking pipe after pipe, while the little kettle steamed away until it was quite dry, a fact discovered by Mr Timson just as he had placed more sugar and spirit in his tumbler, which he pushed aside with a sigh. The subject was brought up no more then, and there was no cribbage; but when Mr Timson rose and took his hat, and had shaken hands and said "good night," he came hurrying back after taking half a dozen steps to tap softly at the door, which had the effect of bringing the vicar to the window.

Timson ran to the area rails and leaned over as far as he could, gesticulating furiously with one arm, as he exclaimed loud enough for his friend to hear—

"I couldn't go away without telling you I'm sure of it, sir. There! I'll take my oath it's the Papist."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### AT FAULT.

HARRY CLAYTON was fortunate, for he was shown into the great Mr Whittrick's presence directly; and, as soon as seated, he had the pleasure of feeling that the private inquirer was mentally photographing him, though, all the same, his words were quiet and urbane. But it seemed as if Mr Whittrick made use of all his faculties at once; he talked to his visitor; he listened to him; he gazed at him tremendously at times; he seemed to be smelling him; and, from the motion of his fingers, he evidently had a strong inclination to feel his visitor, for purposes of future recognition.

"No, sir—at present, none; but we are doing all that is possible."

"But have you nothing definite to communicate?" said Harry, despondently.

"No, sir—at present, nothing," said Mr Whittrick. "But—if I might be so bold—



there was an advertisement in the *Times* this morning, placed there of course by Sir Francis Redgrave. I was not consulted over the matter. I think, you know, sir, that Sir Francis is wrong. I see that he has the Scotland Yard people at work. Not a good plan, I think, sir. They are very able men there—Falkner's good; but too many cooks, you know, spoil the broth. Humble aphorism, but true, sir. However, Sir Francis may depend upon my doing my best."

Harry Clayton rose with a sigh and left the office, feeling very little hope of success in this direction. Jealousy was evidently at work, and he could not but own to himself that Sir Francis had taken a wrong step.

What should he do next? he asked himself. He had not been to Brownjohn Street the last day or two; why should he not go there again? He might obtain some news.

It was hardly worth while going, he thought, only it was possible he might see the bird-dealer himself, and perhaps obtain some little information likely to prove of use.

But D. Wragg was not in, when he reached Brownjohn Street; and in place of seeing

either him or poor Janet, Clayton encountered the round pleasant playbill-rayed face of Mrs Winks, rising like a fleshy sun from behind the paint-cloudy counter, to the loud song of the larks; for Mrs Winks had just been stooping to hide the weakness which she kept for her own private use in a ginger-beer bottle. Mrs Winks' head was only to be seen without curl-papers when she attended the theatres by night, in the full-dress of curls and blue merino, ready to supply the mental and bodily wants of the frequenters of Drury Lane Theatre gallery. Upon this occasion, the playbill used had been one of the newest, the result being, that a good deal of ink had been transferred from the larger letters to Mrs Winks' forehead, giving it a somewhat smudgy look.

The good lady, though, was quite in ignorance of her personal aspect, and after laying aside her weakness, carefully corked, she was bringing out of a capacious pocket a saveloy, wrapped in another of the never-failing playbills—the delicacy being intended for her lunch—when the appearance of Harry Clayton arrested her, and, escaping from the

paper, the saveloy slipped back to the depths of her pocket, to be kept warm till required.

Mrs Winks rose to meet the visitor with a smile, which gave place to a puzzled look upon his inquiring for D. Wragg, and then for Janet.

"I'll go and tell her, sir," said the old lady, and she puffed up-stairs to Janet's room, whence she returned in a few minutes, saying—

"She've got a bad 'eadache, sir, and ain't well; but if you'd leave any message?"

"No!" said Clayton, thoughtfully. "You might, though, tell the French gentleman that I called."

"Which he really is a thorough gentleman," said Mrs Winks, enthusiastically; "as you'd say if you knowed more of him, and heard him paint and play on the fiddle. I mean—I beg your pardon, sir—seen him play on the fiddle and paint. He's a gentleman, every inch of him, if he do lodge in Decadia, which ain't nothing after all, is it, sir? But I'll tell him when he comes back; and your name too?"

Clayton gave her a card, and then walked

thoughtfully back, but not without stopping in front of a blank wall, where a knot of rough-looking fellows were reading a placard, commencing—"Two hundred pounds reward!" and then he shuddered, as one of the party said—"I 'spose they'd hand over all the same, if he happened to be a dead'un?"

There was no news when he 'reached Regent Street, and though Sir Francis had but just concluded an interview with a police sergeant, the mystery seemed as far as ever from solution.

"I think I will go out now, Clayton," said the baronet, in an excited and feverish manner. "It is so hard to stay in, walking up and down, as if caged, and waiting eagerly for every knock and ring. You'll take my place—you won't leave—you won't leave, in case of a call while you are away."

"You may trust me, Sir Francis."

"Yes, yes, I know—I know," said the old gentleman, wringing his hands, "I feel it! "But, Clayton," he said, anxiously, "if any people should come with information in answer to the advertisements, keep them till I come back."

"I will, decidedly!" said Clayton; "but may I ask where you are going now?"

"Only to see if the bills are well posted; and, you know, I might see some one who had news,—it is possible."

"I did see one bill posted up," said Harry, but he did not mention the remark he had heard made.

"That's well, Clayton—that's well! and I hope and trust that this state of anxiety may soon be at an end."

The young man walked with Sir Francis to the door, and felt shocked to see the way in which he had altered during the past few days; then, returning to his seat, he began to think over the strange disappearance, recalling, too, that evening when he had determined to part from Lionel—their visit to the dog-fancier's, and the strange feelings that had been aroused; and now, troubled at heart and reluctant, he was pondering upon whether it was not his duty to place in the hands of the police the knowledge he possessed of Lionel's many visits to Decadia. He could not quite reconcile himself to the task, for he knew that it must result in much

unpleasantness to Janet ; but it struck him suddenly that the behaviour of the deformed girl was strange, though it had not appeared so at the time. Could she know anything ? Had the foolish young man been inveigled to some den, robbed, and murdered ? and did the horrified aspect Janet had worn mean that she was in possession of the secret ? He shuddered as such thoughts arose, and again and again asked himself what he should do, ending by coming to the determination that he would wait, at least until the following day, and then go to the house and warn them of what was about to be done. And yet, if anything were wrong, it would be putting them upon their guard. But their treatment of him seemed to demand that courtesy, and whatever was wrong, he felt that it would be hard for the innocent to be amongst the sufferers. He could not put them to unnecessary pain.

Then came again a cloud of doubt and suspicion, which hung over him till a couple of hours later, when Sir Francis Redgrave returned—pale, anxious, and tired—to look inquiringly at Harry, and receive for answer

a shake of the head, the young man feeling the while that he was not acting openly with his elder, in keeping from him all he knew—information which he was unable to decide whether or not he should impart.

In the evening, as they were seated together—Harry thoughtful and silent, and Sir Francis with his face turned from the light—the baronet spoke—

“ I cannot suffer this inaction much longer,” he said. “ It is always the same answer from the police—‘ Leave it in our hands, sir ; we are hard at work ; though, so far, we have nothing to show.’ They say that every—every deadhouse has been searched ; the men at the water-side have been told to be on the look-out ; hospitals have been visited ; everything possible done ; but who can be satisfied ? We must begin on fresh ground to-morrow, Clayton. What’s that ? Did some one knock ? ”

Mr Stiff entered to announce that there was a man below waiting to see some one respecting the reward.

Sir Francis started instantly to his feet.

“ Show him up at once, Stiff ! ” he ex-

claimed ; and then, not content to wait, in his anxiety he followed the landlord to the stairs, re-entering the room in a few minutes with the heavy-faced young fellow before introduced as Mr John Screwby.

"Now, my man, sit down ; don't stand there !" exclaimed Sir Francis, thrusting a chair forward ; "now, tell us quickly."

"Don't keer to sit down, thanky," said the fellow, surlily, taking a side-long glance round the room, ending by fixing his eyes for a moment on the door, as if to make sure that there was a retreat open in case of need.

"Well, well !" exclaimed Sir Francis ; "now tell us what you know, and why you have come. Did you see the advertisement, or one of those placards ?"

"Bla'guards ?" said the fellow, inquiringly.

"Yes, yes ! the bills."

"Yes ; I saw a bill—two 'underd pound reward—and I've come for that there two 'underd pound reward."

"But your information—what do you know ?" broke in Harry.

The man turned and stared at him heavily.

"Ah ! I didn't know you at first, without



no hat on ; but I knows you now. You was with him once when he came down our way. I seed you then, and I ain't forgot you. But, first of all, who's going to pay this here money ? Is it you, or is it him ?”

“ I 'll pay you—I 'll pay you, my man !” exclaimed Sir Francis ; “ and what is your information ?—what do you know ?”

“ What I know 's worth two 'underd pound now,” said the fellow, winking at Harry ; “ but if I tells it, then, praps, it won't be worth nothin' to me.”

“ You are dealing with a gentleman, my good fellow,” said Harry, “ and you need be under no apprehension.”

“ But how do I know as I shan't be done ?” was the offensive reply. “ Nobody don't trust me nothin' ; and I don't see why I should trust nobody. I 'm a plain-spoke sort of a chap, I am ; and I allers says what 's in my mind. So now, lookye here—you says as you 'll give two 'underd pound to them as 'll tell you where a tall young man's gone—that's it, ain't it ?”

Harry nodded.

“ Werry good, then. I comes here, and I

says, 'And over the stiff!' 'What for?' says you. 'Cos I knows wheer he is,' says I. 'So, now then,' I says, 'hand over the tin.'"

Without another word, Sir Francis went to a small writing-case, opened it, and took from a book a ready-signed cheque for the amount.

"Stop!" exclaimed Harry. "Excuse me, Sir Francis; but your anxiety overleaps your caution. How do we know that this man's information is worth having?"

"He says he knows where—where—you know what he says," said Sir Francis, pitiously.

"Yes," said Harry; "but let him prove his words."

"What! are yer agoin' to run back from it, or are yer agoin' to hand over the stiff?" said the man, uneasily.

"When you have earned it," said Harry, almost fiercely. "Now, look here, my man, show us the value of your information, and restore this gentleman to his friends; and without any reference to such complicity as you may have had in the transaction, the two hundred pounds are yours."

"But lookye here," said the man, leaning towards him; "suppose as he's——you know what?" and he whispered the last words.

"The money is yours all the same," said Harry, in the same tone.

But the man was apparently still far from satisfied, muttering, biting pieces out of his cap-lining, and spitting them upon the carpet, till a bright thought seemed to strike him, to which he gave birth.

"Lookye here, gents. Let's have the money posted fair for both sides. I knows a gentleman down our way as keeps a beer-shop as'd see fair, and make all square. Now, what do you say?"

What would have been said was arrested by a sudden start, or rather jump, on the part of Mr John Screwby, who, following the direction of Sir Francis' eyes, found that another person had entered the room, and taken a place at his elbow, where he had stood for some few moments listening to the conversation.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### SCREWBY'S "TIP."

MR JOHN SCREWBY'S face would have formed a worthy study for a painter ; or, could some instantaneous photographer have secured his aspect, a *carte* could have been produced that would have made the fortune of any speculator in heads of eminent men. For, as he started away, his jaw half dropped, his eyes staring, and fists clenched, he seemed, for the moment, turned into stone—a statue gazing at the quiet unmoved intruder upon the scene.

"How do, Jack?" said the new-comer, quietly, as he took a slight glance from the corners of his eyes at the informer.

"You're werry civil all 'twunst," said the fellow, recovering himself a little ; "but you ain't got nothin' agen me!"

"Not I, Jack—at least, not yet," said the new-comer, smiling. "But what brings you here? Smelt the reward?"

The man stared, sniffed, rubbed his nose viciously upon his sleeve, and shuffled uneasily from foot to foot; but he did not answer.

"He professes to hold the required information," said Sir Francis; "and he is afraid that we shall not duly perform our part of the contract. He is suspicious lest we should withhold part of the money—my friend here thinking that he ought first to prove the value of his tidings."

"*Of* course," said the new-comer, with a commendatory nod of the head at Clayton; "he knows what business is, evidently. Not, though, that our friend Jack Screwby here would do anything but what was of the most honourable description. He's a gent who would scorn a mean action, and as to taking advantage of anybody, there, bless your heart, you might trust him with a baby unborn."

"None o' your gammon, now, can't you?" growled Jack.

"Gammon! nonsense, Jack! It's all straightforward and above-board. You shall be all right. Now, look here—what do you

know? If it's worth the two hundred pounds, you shall have the money clean down in your fist. I'll see that you do. Now are you satisfied?"

"Fain sweatings," growled Mr Screwby, who was apparently far from being in as confident a state as he could have wished.

"What does he say?" exclaimed Sir Francis.

"He means, sir, that he don't want the reward money to be fiddled."

"Fiddled?" said Sir Francis.

"Yes, sir—thinned down, and deducted from."

"Oh, no! let him earn the reward, and he shall have it in full," exclaimed Sir Francis.

"To be sure," said the new-comer. "There, Jack, do you hear? All fair and above-board. Money down as soon as the gentleman is found—*by your information, mind.*"

"Well, never mind about no informations," growled Screwby; "if I find him, eh?"

"Yes, if you find the gentleman."

"Dead or alive?" said Screwby, brutally.

"Dead or alive," said the new-comer, turning, as did also Clayton, to glance at Sir

Francis Redgrave, who was very pale, but who remained unmoved, save for the corners of his mouth, which twitched sharply.

Mr John Screwby evidently had great faith in his own powers as a reader of physiognomy, for he glanced from one to the other, and allowed his eyes to rest long upon each face; then he had a long stare at the door, and another at the window, as if meditating flight, or probably from his foxy wild-beast-like nature, which prompted him to mistrust everybody, and to have both an avenue of entrance and another for escape. Then he took another vicious rub at his nose, and refreshed himself with a nibble at his cap, off which he evidently obtained a few woolly scraps; but at last he allowed his furtive-looking eyes to rest upon the new-comer, who had been all the time thoughtfully tapping his teeth with his pencil, and apparently taking not the slightest notice of him whatever.

The fellow then prepared to speak, by hitching himself closer to the stranger, who only gave him a nod, which was interpreted to mean—"Stay where you are!"

For Mr John Screwby stood shuffling from

foot to foot, and then placed his hand before his mouth, to direct the flow of his discourse only into the stranger's ear.

"Speak out, Jack!" said the latter, coolly; "you needn't be afraid."

"Who 's afeard?" growled Jack, sourly.

"Oh! not you, Jack, of course," said the other; "you've a heart above that sort of thing, you know,"

"You're gallus witty, you are," growled Jack, below his breath.

"Well, speak up, Jack; the gentlemen would like to hear what you have to say, I'm sure."

"Look ye here, then, Master Falkner," said Jack, in a hoarse whisper, that sounded as harsh and grating as the sharpening of a saw,— "look ye here; that there young chap's been hanging about D. Wragg's crib for months past."

"To be sure he has, Jack—to be sure; we know that; and what does it mean? Pigeons, or rats, or dogs, or something of that sort, eh?"

Mr Falkner, sergeant of police, half closed his eyes as he spoke, and thrust his hands



beneath his coat-tails, as, with head on one side, he waited to hear further news.

"Pigins—dorgs! Not a bit of it. He warn't arter them," said Screwby. "Gents like him don't have no 'casion to come our way; cos why? Lots o' dealers comes arter them, and 'll bring 'em any number o' rats, or dorgs either, for the matter o' that. You knows better nor that, Master Falkner. If I was to tell you as I come down here to make these here gents' minds easy, you wouldn't believe me, would you?"

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it, Jack Screwby," said the sergeant, "no, I should not."

"No," said the fellow, chuckling, "in coorse you wouldn't; and no more you don't believe as he went down our way arter rats or dorgs."

"Well, suppose he did not: what then?" said the sergeant.

"Don't you hurry no man's cattle; you may have a moke o' your own some day," said Screwby, with a grin. "I'm a coming to it fast, I am; so look out. Look ye here, governor," he said in his hoarse whisper, and

he craned his neck towards the impassive officer, "lars Chewsday night was a week as I see him go in theer all alone."

"Go in where, Jack—in where?" said the sergeant, quietly, but with his eyes a little closer, his ears twitching, and every nerve evidently on the strain.

"Why, ain't I a tellin' on ye?—in theer!"

"To be sure, yes, of course," said the sergeant, quietly, "in there—all right!"

"Yes," continued Screwby, "in theer—in at D. Wragg's; and," continued the fellow, in deep tones, harsh, husky, and like a hoarse whisper sent through some large tube—"and he didn't come out no more."

## CHAPTER XXV.

### TAKING UP THE CLUE.

As the rough, brutal fellow uttered those words, accompanying them with a low cunning grin of satisfaction at his success, the walls of the room seemed to swim round before Harry Clayton's eyes ; but recovering himself, he ran to the side of Sir Francis, just as he was staggering and would have fallen.

"It's nothing, my dear boy—nothing at all," he gasped ; "only a slight touch of faintness. Ring—a glass of wine—a little water—thanks ! I am a little overdone with anxiety—a trifle unnerved. Sergeant, you will see to this directly, we will go with you."

"Better not, sir—better not," said the officer, bluntly ; "leave it in my hands."

"Sergeant Falkner," said the old man, piteously, "you are not a father, or you would not speak like that."

"Ain't I, by Jove, sir !" cried the sergeant,

heartily ; " I've got ten already, and goodness knows how many more to come. I've had butcher-and-baker-on-the-brain any time this ten years, sir ; let alone boots. But I beg your pardon, Sir Francis ; I won't say another word. Here, you, Screwby, go and sit in that chair," and he pointed to the one farthest from the door. Then, walking across with the man, he to a certain extent seemed to seat him in the chair, the great hulking rascal being like so much plastic clay in his hands.

The next moment Sergeant Falkner was at the low window, which he threw open, and stepped out upon the balcony, but in an instant he came back—very hastily back—into the room, and hurried to the door, which he opened, to take the key from the outside and carefully lock it from within—the key being afterwards placed in his pocket.

A few seconds more, and, to the surprise of Sir Francis and Clayton, he was again in the balcony, where he uttered a low cough.

There was a pause of a few moments, when he stooped over, and leaning down, spoke to some one beneath.

Apparently satisfied, he re-entered the room, closed the window, unlocked the door, and began to walk up and down thoughtfully, tapping his teeth the while with the end of his pencil.

"For what are we waiting, sergeant?" said Sir Francis, anxiously.

"Cab, sir," said the officer, curtly; "and here it is. After you, gentlemen!"

As he spoke, there was the sound of wheels grating against the kerb below; and a few minutes after the party was rattling through the streets, but only to stop before long at a quiet-looking office.

Springing out, the sergeant signed to a policeman, who seemed to be there by accident, but all the same was ready to take his place by the cab-door, adding nothing to the ease and comfort of Mr John Screwby, who was quite as fidgety when, after a few minutes, the sergeant returned, gave a few instructions to the driver, and they were once more rattling through the gas-lit streets.

"Rather a tight fit, gentlemen," said the sergeant, "four in one of these cabs; but it won't be for long."

In effect, sooner than Clayton anticipated, the cab stopped and the sergeant again sprang out.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "perhaps you'll have the goodness to follow at a little distance. It's two streets off yet; but in this extremely pleasant and salubrious region, we don't want to make any fuss. My dear friend Mr John Screwby and I will go on together, so as to show the way. You need not be afraid," he whispered to Clayton. "Keep tight hold of the old gentleman's arm, and bring him along quickly. There's plenty of help close at hand."

Clayton nodded, and then, as he drew the baronet's arm through his own, he hastily glanced round to see once more the thronging types of misery and vice that he had encountered on his previous visits: there were the same hulking ruffians, short of hair, sallow of face, and low of brow—own brothers in aspect of the gentleman who had turned informer; there, too, were the same slatternly women, old and young; children who never seemed to have been young; and at nearly every corner the gin-palace in full

levée, its courtiers thronging in and out as the doors swung to and fro.

Harry read this at a glance, and then followed the sergeant through the crowded streets, attracting as little notice as was possible; but from time to time the young man could see that some ruffianly head or another was turned to gaze after Screwby and his companion; intelligent nods and winks, too, were passed from one observer to another, and once Harry heard the whispered words—

“What’s up?”

No one seemed to care, though, to follow figures that were evidently well-known, and so great was the attention bestowed upon them, that little, so far as he could see, fell to the share of Sir Francis and himself.

They soon reached the shop of Mr D. Wragg, the shutters of which natural history emporium were up, but both side and shop doors were wide open, closing after them, though, by invisible agency, as it appeared, until Harry turned to find that, springing as it were from that invisible region they are said so much to affect when wanted, a couple of policemen were at his elbow, whose duty

it had doubtless been to close the portals against the curious crowd, certain to collect as soon as it was bruited abroad that there was "a case on" at the house of "Mr D. Wragg, naturalist."



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### NOT HIS CASTLE.

“HULLO! I say! what’s all this here about?” cried a familiar voice, and D. Wragg began to jerk himself fiercely into the shop. “Don’t you make no mistake. What! hullo! eh! I say!” he exclaimed, with a grin of delight taking the place of his surprise; “what! my lovely Jack Screwby! Nabbed at last?”

“No, I ain’t nabbed at last neither, Muster D. Wragg,” sneered the gentleman addressed; “and, as they says to me wunst—well, more ’n wunst, if you like,” he growled, as he caught the sergeant’s eye fixed upon him—“as they says to me, says they, ‘Don’t you be so jolly free with your tongue, ’cos what you says now may be used as evidence agen you.’”

D. Wragg’s features twitched furiously as he turned up the gas, and then, for the first time, he caught sight of Harry Clayton, and jerked violently, to the great delight of

Screwby, who stood grinning and rubbing his hands, thoroughly enjoying the discomfiture of his enemy.

"Now, don't you make no mistake, sir," exclaimed D. Wragg; "the dog ain't here this time, and I ain't seen it, as I'll take my Bible oath on it. There ain't neither a bird, nor a hanimal, nor nothink o' no kind as ain't mine, and paid for down on the nail; so don't you make no mistake now, come! You can do as you like, you know; only mind this here—there's law for me, as well as law for you. You can think as I've got the dorg, if you like; only 'spectable houses o' business ain't to be entered at all times without things being made square."

"There! why don't you take advice when it's given you, old chap?" said the sergeant. "You know what we've come about, though, I dessay?"

"Know what you've come about!" said D. Wragg; "why, of course I do. You've come about that there gent's friend's dorg, same as they've been together about it before, and I helped 'em into getting of it; but you're in the wrong box this time, so I tell you.

But what do you expect you're going to do?"

"What's the good of being a fool, Wragg? The game's up; so you may just as well give in quietly, and not go into a pack of stuff about dogs."

But D. Wragg protested again that he knew they must be come about some dog or another, till, assuming an injured air, he took out his pipe and lit it, and then stood with folded arms, jerking himself about, and muttering, while, without further ceremony, the police, accompanied in every movement by Sir Francis and Harry Clayton, thoroughly searched the house, beginning with the underground kitchen, and then proceeding upwards, but not until due precautions had been taken to prevent the escape of the inmates.

"This is all very well, sir, you know," said the sergeant; "but of course we don't expect to find anything more than a clue of some kind, and I've my doubts even about that. Old Wragg does not look so much like a foxy terrier for nothing. Whatever has been done, I don't give the old chap credit for having bungled it; but, all the same, it seemed

the thing to come—not quite regular, you know,” he added, confidentially, “but we’ll risk that.”

Room after room was examined, until the second floor was reached, and here Harry expected to find the abode of Canau. His heart accelerated its beating—perhaps though only with the ascent; but he thought, all the same, that here would Janet be, and perhaps with her Patty Pellet, for he knew how strong was the tie between them.

It proved to be as he anticipated, for Janet and Patty stood by the window, and with them Mrs Winks, who had hurried up-stairs at the first arrival of the visitors, to spare the girls from needless alarm.

“I trust you will not lay this intrusion to my charge,” said Clayton, approaching. “You gave me your word that you knew nothing of my friend’s disappearance, and I believed you.”

“And then to prove your faith, you brought the police here to search our rooms,” said Janet, fiercely, as she turned away.

“Do not be unjust,” said Harry; “information has been given to us that my poor

friend was seen to enter this house upon the night of his disappearance, and was not seen to return."

"Oh, my! good 'evins! what a horrid story!" exclaimed Mrs Winks; "when I was at home all that very night, bad with the tic, same as I am to-night, and no gentleman come here then, as I'll take my oath on. And me abusin' the tic all the while as was a blessin' in disguise, for it's glad enough I am to be at home this night, my dears. He never come anigh here that Chewsdays night though."

"Yes, he did now; so don't you make no mistake. Come about a new dog-collar, he did, and took it away with him while you was up-stairs, Mother Winks."

D. Wragg had spoken these words to the extreme delight of Screwby, who grinned and rubbed his hands down his sides upon hearing this voluntary corroboration of his evidence.

But the sergeant merely shook his head, feeling convinced that the lame gentleman who had jerked his body up-stairs was far too old a stager to commit himself by such an

open statement unless he had good reason for so doing.

Meanwhile the master of the house looked on, while the police peered into all sorts of impossible places ; passing over things that might perhaps have served as a clue, to stop to examine a scrap of paper or pieces of furniture that could not relate to the matter in hand. Walls were tapped, chimneys examined, cupboards peered into, and the light of bull's-eye lanterns was made to startle spiders in many a dark corner.

"This here wall's hollow!" exclaimed one of the policemen suddenly, as he started upon finding a certain resonant echo to the blows he bestowed at one side of the room.

"Most likely," said the sergeant, drily, "Why, where are your brains, man? Don't you see that the staircase is behind?"

The man relieved himself of his hard hat, wiped his forehead, and then resumed his search, till the sergeant declaring himself satisfied so far, a move was made for the upper regions.

"There ain't nothing up there; so now then," cried D. Wragg, desperately; "I protest

against all this here. You needn't go up; and don't you make no mistake; I ain't agoin' to stand having my place searched without a warrant. I'll have it outer some on you for this."

As he spoke, D. Wragg started to the foot of the attic staircase, and made as if he would have barred the way; but the sergeant laid one firm hand upon his shoulder, and D. Wragg seemed to shrink away from that touch like the leaves of a mimosa. He glided aside, as if in dread lest the hand that touched him should remain there, and his face grew ashy and careworn—abject too in the extreme—until he encountered the triumphant grins of Mr John Screwby, when he roused himself directly, and stared his tormentor full in the face.

"You see, my friend," said the sergeant, upon whom not one of D. Wragg's changes of countenance was lost,—“you see, my friend, now that we are up so high, we may as well go up a little higher—save coming again, perhaps.”

D. Wragg muttered uneasily, and glanced right and left, and then the creaking stairs

were ascended, when he moved slowly off.

"Stop him there, will you!" cried the sergeant, who saw through the little dealer's design.

"What d'yer mean? what's all this?" cried D. Wragg, struggling with the man, who caught the wrist of his coat in a tight grasp. "If you're going to take a fellow up, take him up; but don't get playing at fast and loose. Don't you make no mistake, I ain't agoin' to stand this sorter thing. I ain't got his dorg, as I've told you 'arf a dozen times; but some on you shall pay for it, so I tell you."

D. Wragg's evasion being stayed, and his small person forced to the front, he was one of those who filled up the landing, close by a couple of doors—one strongly padlocked, and the other cobwebbed and dirty, as if it had not been opened for years.

"Now then, where are the keys of these doors?" said the sergeant.

"Break 'em open while you are about it," cried D. Wragg, in tones that bordered upon a howl. "But don't you make no mistake; I



protest against this here, once more. I ain't agoin' to have my house sacked like this here for nothing. I should have thought as them gents would ha' stopped it all; but never mind, I don't care. It shan't go to the bottom without some on you hearin' of it."

"Hold your tongue, will you, and give up the keys," said the sergeant, who looked just a trifle less impassive than usual.

"What is it you all mean?" cried D. Wragg, excitedly, "what is it you are all thinking about? You don't suppose as I'm giving up my respectable business of a nat'ralist to go in for burking and doctor's work, do you? You don't suppose as I know anything of the young chap as is gone. Don't you make no mistake: I can see through it all. You've been crammed and filled up with all sorts o' gammon; but I wonder at you, Sergeant Falkner, a-listening to what such a thing as *that* says."

D. Wragg pointed as he spoke at Mr John Screwby, which gentleman had, from a scarcity of watchers, and from doubts as to the probability of his staying so long as he was wanted, been brought up from stage to stage,

to stand now, shuffling from foot to foot, and staring first at the irate dealer, and then at the door which concealed the interior of the attic from his gaze.

"Somebody shall pay for all this, though," cried D. Wragg, "as I said afore, and as I'll say half a score o' times."

As he spoke, he looked full at Sir Francis, as if identifying him with the "somebody" who should be made to pay, although at the present time no mean sum of the baronet's money had made its way into his pockets. But at last, seeing that Sergeant Falkner would not be trifled with, and that in another moment the door or doors would be kicked down, he produced the keys with a great many protestations, ending at last in a perfect whine of misery, one that strangely reminded the eager bystanders of the dogs below.

But the keys produced, D. Wragg's importance decreased on the instant; for though there were those present who trembled at the thought of the door being thrown back, the majority were devoured by curiosity—the morbid curiosity which used to take a crowd to an execution, and even

at the present day attracts hundreds to the Old Bailey that they may catch a glimpse of the black flag, and imagine for themselves the horrors going on behind the grim black stony walls.

There were no stony walls here though—only a few slight boards between the gazers and the mystery whose solution they were so eager to read.

“Here! stop him, will you!” cried the sergeant. “Have you any brains at all, Smith?”

P. C. Smith raised his hand to his head, as if to feel whether those thought-producers—brains—were really there; but he contented himself with a vicious scratch, as he once more took hold of D. Wragg, that gentleman having made another attempt to limp away.

“Don’t you make no mistake,” half-whimpered the dealer, rubbing his hands together, bending down as if in pain, and limping about to the extent of his tether—to wit, his own arm and that of the policeman. “I’ll be squared for this; just you see if I ain’t.”

"Very well—very well," exclaimed the sergeant, with something of excitement in his tones; "only don't make quite so much noise about it. Now then," he cried, as he unlocked the fastening, and threw open the rickety door, whose rusty hinges creaked dismally, while the door itself was stopped, when little more than ajar, by the warped framework, which forced one corner upon the floor.

"Now I hope you're happy," said D. Wragg.

"Not yet—not yet," said the sergeant, "but we mean to get there soon. Now then, pass him here, Smith. That's right. Now Mr Wragg, you go first, and we'll follow."

Again, there was the dealer's strong resemblance to the ragged terrier brought out; for the sergeant treated him precisely as a keeper would a dog that he was about to place in some fox's hole, D. Wragg being thrust forward into the room—going, though, most unwillingly, and had he suddenly broken out into a sharp wailing bark, no one would have felt much surprised.

The sergeant laid his hands upon D. Wragg's shoulders as he forced him in, peering over the said shoulders into the dingy place ahead, and then he drew back for a few moments.

"Here, Smith, you take my place," he said; and the constable went next, while his leader crossed the low landing to where, arm-in-arm, stood Clayton and Sir Francis. "Just a moment, please, sir," he said to Clayton, in a low voice; and then aloud to the others present, "Stand back there, will you: I go next!"

"What do you want to say?" said Clayton, glancing uneasily at the sergeant's stern face, as the latter turned his eyes for a moment to where they had left Sir Francis.

"Only, sir," said the sergeant, in a whisper, "that if I was in your place, I should think it my duty at any cost to get him away."

The young man shook his head, for he knew that the sergeant counselled an impossibility.

"Well, sir, I thought it my duty to advise," said the sergeant.

"Quite right—quite right," said Clayton,

hastily; "but he would not stir an inch. Now, pray end this horrible suspense."

Clayton looked round once more to see that the women were not within hearing, and then, with Sir Francis and the other constable, he passed into the low, dingy, sloping-ceiled room.

There had once evidently been a partition, but this had been removed, and the attics turned into one long place, so that the whole of the top floor could be seen through at a glance, with its lumber of old cages, bundles of dried herbs, baskets of feathers, and broken furniture—chairs lame of one leg, halt and rickety tables, and an old wash-stand.

In three different corners, chained to staples in the wall, and each with its straw bed, were as many wretched captives, wasting their days in their lofty prison. But these were only three dogs, kept there for reasons best known to the occupant of the house.

"Nothing here," was the mental remark of the sergeant, as he made his light play about the place, its rays falling strangely

upon each of the dogs in turn, and eliciting howls that were doleful in the extreme.

That light, though, was allowed to rest longest upon the fourth corner of the room, where there were three well-filled sacks and a large flat basket.

“Look outside the window ; there’s a parapet out there in the front. One of you had better crawl along a little each way, and see if you can make anything out,” said the sergeant, who directly after turned to another of his men. “Here, you !” he exclaimed, “climb up there,” and he pointed to a half-closed trap-door in the ceiling.

His orders were obeyed, the bystanders watching eagerly the progress of events, till the man who had somewhat nervously forced his way through the trap came back covered with whitewash and cobwebs, which he brushed impatiently from his uniform.

“Well ?” said the sergeant, as the man descended by means of the broken washstand and chair, which had been used for escalading purposes.

“No one been up there this side o’ six months ago, I’ll swear,” said the man ; “the

cobwebs would have told you that if you'd liked to look."

The sergeant turned sharply upon his muttering subordinate, but his attention was taken off by the return of the man who had been sent outside to examine the gutter.

"Well?" said the sergeant again, as this man climbed back.

"Well, I ain't seen nothing," said the latter, dragging one leg after him into the room. "Quiet, will you?" he cried to a dog which bayed at him furiously. "You can go along out there for best part of a mile if you like, dodging in and out, for it seems to be a reg'lar rat's run from winder to winder. There's some nice games carried on, I'll be bound, and any manner of thing might be done here or there, and hidden from place to place without us being a bit the wiser."

"How many men would it take to make a good search?" said the sergeant.

"Hundred," said his subordinate, gruffly, "would be nowhere. You'd want a man at every door, and at every attic window; and when you tried to stop 'em, they'd slip out somewhere else."



The sergeant stood for a moment thinking, and then he made a step towards the sacks, looking curiously at the dog-fancier.

"Shouldn't wonder if there was a tale hanging to every one of those dogs," he said, grimly. "But what's in these sacks?"

"Now look ye here—look ye here!" exclaimed D. Wragg, assuming not to have heard the last remark; "don't you make no mistake. You've searched all from top to bottom now, gents, so let's have an end of all this game."

"Stand aside, will you," cried the sergeant, roughly; and forcing D. Wragg back, he strode up to the sacks, threw them down one after the other, and felt through them.

"Pooh! corks!" he exclaimed, contemptuously, after a few moments' examination. "Don't know what you want with corks up here though, master. What's in the basket? Tied down, eh?"

"Now look here, don't you make no mistake—don't now—I purtest agen it all."

With a fierce rush, D. Wragg threw himself upon the great basket, clinging frantically thereto, and struggling viciously, and kicking

with his club boot at the men who tried to drag him away.

A sharp scuffle ensued, for the dealer clung tightly to the great flat hamper, and it was not till after quite a battle that D. Wragg was dragged from his hold, to stand panting, hot, and glaring of eye, gazing from one to the other.

"Now do, sir—do take my advice," said the sergeant, once more drawing Harry Clayton aside. "I tell you frankly, I don't like the look of things; and only think of the old gentleman, sir, if anything should prove to be wrong. You'd better take him away—you had indeed."

He left Clayton, and, as if seeking to make delays, went and spoke to the constables, and then threatened to handcuff the dealer if he did not quietly submit.

"I don't care," said D. Wragg; "you may handcuff me, and leg-cuff me, and put a collar round my neck if you like; but I ain't agoin' to stand still and see my place pulled all to pieces for nothing at all. Don't you make"——

"There! hold your tongue!" cried the ser-

geant ; and he turned round to gaze at Harry Clayton, who had slowly crossed to where Sir Francis was standing, pondering the while upon the detective's meaning looks and words.

He laid his hand upon the old man's arm, but Sir Francis, on hearing his words, although he shudderingly turned from where lay the basket, sternly refused to go, and moved Harry aside as he grew more earnest and pressing.

Sergeant Falkner shrugged his shoulders, and muttered something about the obstinacy of old folks. Then he turned away, and, as a groan burst from D. Wragg, and he struggled with his captors, the basket was approached, the string that tied down the lid was cut ; the said lid, set quite free, was dashed open, and then the sergeant stood gazing excitedly down into the straw which covered something with which the great wicker case was filled.

" Here ! hold a lanthorn here, somebody," cried the sergeant ; and one of the men who were holding D. Wragg darted eagerly forward, making the rays of his bull's-eye fall full upon the straw, when, after parting it a

little, the lid was dashed down again, and the sergeant sat upon it, wiping his hot forehead.

“Pooh! what a fool I am!” he ejaculated the next instant; “but really for a while I thought——. Well, Mr Wragg, I think we’ve done up here for the present; but ’pon my soul, if I had a lot of stolen hams in my attic, I don’t think I should tell the police quite so plainly as you did that every one of them belonged to some one else.”

END OF VOL. II.











